Reading images, seeing texts: towards a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies

Bonfiglio, Ryan P

Abstract: In recent years, a growing number of biblical scholars have turned to ancient art as a vital resource for understanding the historical and conceptual background of the Bible. While these "iconographic" approaches have done much to advance findings from more traditional text-based studies, they have yet to fully address issues pertaining to the nature, power, and meaning of ancient art as well as the social practices, effects, and responses that are derived from and inform how images functioned in ancient visual culture. This volume offers a sustained engagement of theories of visual culture with the goal of further refining how images are utilized in biblical research. Issues addressed include: the function of images as a language of communication and its implications for debates about textual literacy in ancient Israel (ch. 2); the nature of the image-text relationship and how it informs methods of iconographic exegesis as well as the analysis of ancient mixed-media artifacts (ch. 3); approaches to visual analysis that take into account how linguistic and non-linguistic signs convey meaning in different ways (ch. 4); how theories about the ontology and social agency of art shed new light on the history of visual response in the ancient world, including image theft and destruction (ch. 5); and how a consideration of visual practices and the social and religious dimensions of sight can advance understandings of the nature of Israelite aniconism and the search for Yahweh's cult image (ch. 6). Insights gained from these analyses are synthesized into a hermeneutical framework that outlines a more critical approach to working with images in the field of biblical studies.

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Preface

What the familiar African proverb asserts about successfully raising a child applies equally well to the publication of an academic monograph: it takes a village. In my case, this "village" has consisted of a network of teachers, colleagues, friends, and institutions that have nurtured this project along from its earliest stages of development as a doctoral dissertation through Emory University's Graduate Division of Religion (May 2014). First and foremost, I must thank the chair of my dissertation committee, Brent A. Strawn. His critical input and unwavering encouragement has left an indelible mark on this project and in many other areas of my work. I am also deeply indebted to the keen insights of the other Emory faculty who served on my dissertation committee: Carol A. Newsom, Joel M. LeMon, and Jacob L. Wright. I am particularly thankful for scholars outside of Emory who served on my dissertation committee, including Zainab Bahrani from Columbia University and Christoph Uehlinger from the University of Zurich. Additional thanks goes to Christoph Uehlinger who assisted with this project beyond the dissertation stage and offered invaluable insight as I revised this volume for inclusion in the OBO series. I am also grateful for the extraordinarily good work of Lydia Foreman who has served as my research assistant and was instrumental in the preparation of the final manuscript.

In addition to these scholars, I must also express my appreciation to several institutions that have generously supported this project. Emory's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, the Graduate Division of Religion, and the Woodruff Foundation have offered substantial financial assistance throughout my time at Emory. The TAM Institute for Jewish Studies and the Luce Foundation's Society for the Arts in Religious and Theological Studies have provided additional support for summer research and travel. The Mellon Foundation's Sawyer Seminar on Visual Exegesis underwrote the final year of my dissertation research. The diverse scholars who participated in this interdisciplinary research colloquium challenged me to think in new ways about this project as well as the intersection of art and religion more broadly. The Louisville Institute's Postdoctoral Fellowship Program provided funding, training, and mentorship that has proven crucial to the refinement of this project and to other areas of research and teaching. I am especially grateful for

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Ryan P. Bonfiglio
Summer 2016
Atlanta

Abbreviations

ABAT2	*Altorientalische Bilder zum Alten Testament.* Edited by Hugo Gressmann. 2d ed. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1927.
ABD	*Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Edited by D. N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York. 1992.
AJA	*American Journal of Archaeology*
AJSL	*American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature*
ANET	Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament. Edited by J. B. Pritchard. 3d ed. Princeton, 1969.
ANETS	*Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies*
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
BA	*Biblical Archaeologist*
BASOR	*Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*
BBR	*Bulletin for Biblical Research*
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BTB	*Biblical Theology Bulletin*
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft.
CBET	Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CC	Continental Commentaries
CHANE	Culture and History of the Ancient Near East
ConBOT	Coniectanea biblica: Old Testament Series
COS	*The Context of Scripture.* Edited by W. W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr. 3 vols. Leiden, 1997–2002.
CSAJ	Jürg Eggler and Othmar Keel, *Corpus der Siegel-Amulette aus Jordanien: vom Neolithikum bis zur Perserzeit*. OBO.SA 25. Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
CSAPI	Othmar Keel, *Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette aus Palästina/Israel. Von den Anfängen bis zur Perserzeit. Einleitung*. OBO.SA 10. Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995.
CSAPI 1	Othmar Keel, *Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette aus Palästina/Israel. Von den Anfängen bis zur Perserzeit. Katalog Band I: Von Tell Abu*

	Farağ bis ʿAtlit. OBO.SA 13. Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997.
CSAPI 2	Othmar Keel, *Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette aus Palästina/Israel. Von den Anfängen bis zur Perserzeit. Katalog Band II: Von Bahan bis Tel Eton. Mit Beiträgen von Daphna Ben-Tor, Baruch Brandl und Robert Wenning.* OBO.SA 29. Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010.
CSAPI 3	Othmar Keel, *Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette aus Palästina/Israel. Von den Anfängen bis zur Perserzeit. Katalog Band III: Von Tell el-Farʿa bis Tel el-Fir.* OBO.SA 31. Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010.
CSAPI 4	Othmar Keel, *Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette aus Palästina/Israel. Von den Anfängen bis zur Perserzeit. Katalog Band IV: Von Tel Gamma bis Chirbet Husche.* OBO.SA 33. Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013.
ESHM	European Seminar on Methodology in Israel's History
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
GGG	Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998. German original: 1992.
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
IEJ	*Israel Exploration Journal*
IPIAO 1	Silvia Schroer and Othmar Keel, *Die Ikonographie Palästinas/Israels und der Alte Orient. Eine Religionsgeschichte in Bildern. Band 1: Vom ausgehenden Mesolithikum bis zum Frühbronzezeit.* Fribourg: Academic Press, 2005.
IPIAO 2	Silvia Schroer, *Die Ikonographie Palästinas/Israels und der Alte Orient. Eine Religionsgeschichte in Bildern. Band 2: Die Mittelbronzezeit.* Fribourg: Academic Press, 2008.
IPIAO 3	Silvia Schroer, *Die Ikonographie Palästinas/Israels und der Alte Orient. Eine Religionsgeschichte in Bildern. Band 3: Die Spätbronzezeit.* Fribourg: Academic Press, 2010.
IPIAO 4	Silvia Schroer, *Die Ikonographie Palästinas/Israels und der Alte Orient. Eine Religionsgeschichte in Bildern. Band 4: Die Eisenzeit bis zum Ende der perischen Herrschaft.* 2 vols. Fribourg: Academic Press, forthcoming.
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JCS	*Journal of Cuneiform Studies*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*

JHNES	Johns Hopkins Near Eastern Studies
JNES	*Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JNSL	*Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages*
JRitSt	*Journal of Ritual Studies*
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
JSOT	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
JVC	*Journal of Visual Culture*
LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Studies
NHMS	Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies
NovTSup	Novum Testamentum Supplements
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
OBO.SA	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis. Series Archaeologica
OIP	Oriental Institute Publications
PIA	Publications of the Institute of Archaeology
RelSRev	*Religious Studies Review*
RHR	*Revue de l'histoire des religions*
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBLRBS	Society of Biblical Literature Resources for Biblical Studies
SBW	Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World. Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*. Reprint ed. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1997 (1978). German original: 1972.
SemeiaSt	Semeia Studies
TDOT	*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament.* Edited by G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren. Translated by J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, D. E. Green. 8 vols. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974–.
TSAJ	Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum
TUAT	*Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments.* Edited by Otto Kaiser. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1984–.
TynBul	*Tyndale Bulletin*
UF	*Ugarit-Forschungen*
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
WUNT	*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament*
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*
ZDPV	*Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins*

Chapter 1

Introduction:
Furthering the Visual Turn

"This [iconography] is perhaps the most promising direction taken in recent biblical scholarship's use of the comparative method. One can only hope that scholars will begin to give serious attention to non-epigraphic evidence in a more self-critical fashion."[1]

1.1. The (Partial) Visual Turn in Biblical Studies

Whether they are classified as art or artifact, icon or idol, images are constituent components of human culture both in ancient and modern contexts. However ubiquitous images might be throughout history, it has only been in the closing decades of the twentieth century that the intellectual discourse of the humanities and social sciences has begun to shift more decisively towards questions about the place of images in cultural theory and the importance of visual data in historical research.[2] Art historian and visu-

[1] J. J. M. Roberts, "The Ancient Near Eastern Environment," in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters* (ed. Douglas A. Knight and Gene M. Tucker; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985), 95.

[2] See, for instance, W. J. T. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture," *JVC* 1 (2002): 165–81. Mitchell disagrees with those who see the modern era as one uniquely dominated by visual media or who decry the "hegemony of the visible" as a function of new media technologies in Western cultures. For instance, Neil Postman's popular book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985) blames the supposed decay of American culture on the effect of the image-rich medium of television. Seeking an ethical basis for his critique, Postman appeals to the second commandment of the Decalogue, confident that the authors of this text "*assumed a connection between forms of human communication and the quality of a culture*" (9; emphasis his). For Postman, this particular interpretation of the second commandment not only applies to ancient Israelites in their historical context but also to his own readers. Postman concludes: "People like ourselves who are in the process of converting their culture from word-centered to image-centered might profit by reflecting on this Mosaic injunction" (9). The type of logo-centric perspective on display in Postman's work is neither uncommon nor recent. The long history of iconoclastic tendencies and the fear of images more broadly are the subject of David Freedberg's *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Freedberg's analysis—and the

al culture theorist W. J. T. Mitchell has described this recent groundswell of interest in all things visual as a "pictorial" or visual turn.[3] While Mitchell notes that the beginning of such a turn can be traced to the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Nelson Goodman earlier in the twentieth century, a concern for visual materials and visual culture has intensified and broadened since the early 1990s and now plays a prominent role in a diverse array of fields, including history, anthropology, political science, gender studies, religion, and even cognitive science.[4] Although each of these fields naturally utilizes images in different ways and towards different ends, they all evince a fundamental shift away from predominantly word- and text-centered methodologies. Instead, they place greater emphasis on analyzing visual materials and their capacity to reflect, instantiate, and give shape to the beliefs, values, ideologies, and social systems operative within a given historical and cultural setting.

In light of the exceptionally wide arc of this visual turn in the humanities and social sciences, it is fitting to wonder whether a similar shift might be evident in recent work in biblical studies. At first glance, such a turn appears to be readily apparent. Since the early 1970s, a small but growing number of biblical scholars have begun to look to ancient art, or iconography, as a critical resource for interpreting biblical imagery and better understanding the historical and cultural background of the biblical world.[5]

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manifestation of Postman-like attitudes in biblical scholarship—will be scrutinized more fully later in this study.

[3] Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 11. In describing a shift in intellectual discourse as a "turn," Mitchell draws on the language of Richard Rorty, who explains the history of philosophy as a series of intellectual turns (see Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979], 263; and idem, *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967]). Others have described this same phenomenon as a "visual turn" or a "visualistic turn" (see Martin Jay, "That Visual Turn," *JVC* 1 [2002]: 87–92; and Klaus Sachs-Hombach, *Bildtheorien: Anthropologische und kulturelle Grundlagen des Visualistic Turn* [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009]). This broader terminology is perhaps preferable since the shift in academic discourse is not only towards the study of material objects (i.e., "pictures") but also towards the analysis of visual practices and routines that rely on those objects. As such, I employ the term "visual turn" here and elsewhere in the study. It should also be noted that other "turns" are commonly identified in the broader area of cultural studies, including "the ritualistic turn," "the performative turn," and so forth.

[4] See, for instance, Charles Sanders Peirce, *Elements of Logic* (vol. 2 of *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*; ed. Charles E. Hartshorne and Paul Weiss; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932); Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (trans. G. E. M. Anscombe; New York: Macmillan, 1953); and Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968).

[5] Terms like art, image, and iconography can be somewhat slippery. While it is impractical—and potentially confusing—to parse too finely the differences between these and re-

This approach, which is variously known as biblical iconography or iconographic exegesis, was pioneered by Othmar Keel at the University of Fribourg and was developed through a network of his students and colleagues, perhaps most notably Christoph Uehlinger.[6]

Over the next several decades, the so-called "Fribourg School" produced a number of studies that convincingly demonstrated the value and even the necessity of drawing on ancient Near Eastern visual remains in the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible and the analysis of Israelite religion.[7] Since the turn of the century, the pioneering work of the Fribourg School has been further advanced by a second generation of scholars. One of the hallmarks of this "second wave" of iconographic exegesis is its increased attention to and revision of interpretive methods, especially when it comes to relating image and text. Among others, Brent A. Strawn, Joel M. LeMon, and Izaak J. de Hulster have made substantial contributions to iconographic exegesis by not only categorizing various methodological procedures evident in past research but also reformulating those procedures for future use.[8] Due in no small part to these efforts, at the outset of the twenty-first

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lated terms, it is nevertheless helpful to strive for a general level of consistency in their use. As such, for the purposes of this study I tend to use "art" to refer to seal impressions, monumental reliefs, or other types of artifacts that display visual content. I use "image" to refer to the non-textual content of specific visual materials or art objects. The term "iconography" is used in this study to refer to at least three different things: (1) a type of art object (i.e., ancient Near Eastern *iconography*); (2) the visual content of an art object (i.e., an *iconographic* motif); and (3) an approach to analyzing visual data (i.e., the *iconographic* method).

[6] For the use and discussion of the term "biblical iconography" or, alternatively, the "iconographic-biblical approach," see Joel M. LeMon, "Iconographic Approaches: The Iconic Structure of Psalm 17," in *Method Matters* (ed. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards; SBLRBS 56; Boston: Brill, 2010), 146–52. For the use of "iconographic exegesis" in reference to the same methodological approach, see Izaak de Hulster, Brent A. Strawn, and Ryan P. Bonfiglio, eds., *Iconographic Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: An Introduction to its Method and Practice* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015). In this present study, I opt to use "iconographic exegesis" as a description of a broadly defined method that studies biblical literature in light of ancient art.

[7] Despite its name, the Fribourg School does not explicitly refer to a locality-based tradition. Rather, it is best understood as a widespread network of scholars, centered around Keel and his students and colleagues, such as Izak Cornelius, Christian Hermann, Karl Jaroš, Silvia Schroer, Thomas Staubli, Urs Winter, Max Küchler, Jürg Eggler, and Christoph Uehlinger, who are interested in drawing upon ANE art to help inform the study of the history of religion and the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. For a helpful survey of the historical development and scholarly contributions of Keel and the Fribourg School, see Izaak J. de Hulster, "Illuminating Images: An Iconographic Method of Old Testament Exegesis with Three Case Studies from Third Isaiah" (Ph.D. diss., Utrecht University, 2008), esp. 21–164.

[8] See Strawn, *What is Stronger than a Lion? Leonine Image and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (OBO 212; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005); de Hulster, *Iconographic Exegesis and Third Isaiah* (FAT

century, iconographic exegesis has gained a seat at the table of well-accepted methods for studying the Hebrew Bible, and to a lesser extent, the New Testament.[9]

With contributions to iconographic exegesis on the rise in the scholarly literature in recent decades, it is tempting to announce a visual turn in biblical studies in a way that echoes Mitchell's description of the heightened concern for images in the intellectual discourse of other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Nevertheless, there remain good reasons to suspect that this visual turn in biblical studies has only been a partial one. Namely, while biblical scholars have increasingly turned to ancient visual materials as objects of study, far less attention has been given to questions pertaining to the nature of visual culture, and with it, more critical approaches to the study of visual representation, the image-text relationship, and the practices that are derived from, inform, and maintain the function of visual materials in a given social context.[10] In fact, sustained reflection

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2/36; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009); and LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form in the Psalms: Exploring Congruent Iconography and Texts* (OBO 242; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010).

[9] That iconographic exegesis has become a well-accepted method within biblical studies is evident not only in the proliferation of journal articles and monographs in this field but also its inclusion as a standard method of exegesis in handbooks and surveys of interpretive approaches. For instance, the 2010 volume, *Method Matters*, includes an essay about iconographic exegesis in its extensive survey of methods of biblical interpretation. Strawn also reflects on the importance of iconographic exegesis to comparative methods in the same volume ("Comparative Approaches: History Theory and the Image of God," *Method Matters*, 117–42) and elsewhere, to the history of Israelite religion ("Whence Leonine Yahweh? Iconography and the History of Israelite Religion," in *Images and Prophecy in the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean* [ed. Martti Nissinen and Charles E. Carter; FRLANT 233; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009], 51–85). For an introduction to corresponding developments in New Testament scholarship, see Annette Weissenrieder, Friederike Wendt, and Petra von Gemünden, *Picturing the New Testament: Studies in Ancient Visual Images* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

[10] When used in reference to an academic discipline, the term visual culture generally indicates an interdisciplinary field that emerged in the early 1990s and examines various popular visual practices (photography, advertisements, animation, computer graphics, crafts, fashion, graffiti, tattoos, films, TV, etc.) with specific attention to new theoretical perspectives on image analysis, the relationship of images and culture, and the socially and culturally constructed processes of seeing. For a helpful and concise survey of the historical development of this field, see James Elkins, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1–30. At other times, visual culture tends to refer to the objects of study themselves, usually connoting "low" art or everyday "nonart" images in contradistinction to "high" art, which is the traditional subject of art history (Elkins, *The Domain of Images* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999], 3–5). However, Mitchell (and others) prefer to use visual culture to refer not only to the object of study (i.e., the sum total of visual practices and materials in a given culture) but also the ways in which visual materials are socially and culturally constructed and, conversely, how visual materials construct the social and

on visual theory *per se*—that is, questions concerning the nature, function, power, and effects of images—have rarely surfaced in iconographic exegesis, be it in the work of the Fribourg School or in the more recent second wave of scholarship.[11] Put differently, while iconographic exegesis is now more widely practiced within biblical studies, it remains minimally scrutinized.

1.2. From Iconographic Method to Visual Theory

In adjudicating matters in this fashion, an important distinction must be made between contributions to iconographic exegesis that take up questions of method and those that take up questions of theory, even as the two readily intersect and overlap. Whereas methodological concerns typically focus on a set of organized and delineated procedures that guide how interpretation is carried out, questions of theory tend to focus on preliminary considerations, or a system of underlying principles, that provide an epistemological rationale for why given methods are practiced.

In his own treatment of the relationship between methods and theories in iconographic exegesis, de Hulster contends that "theory shapes the framework (approach) and supports the construction of tools whereas method puts a theory into practice."[12] If, as de Hulster contends, a method can be described as a way or path of investigation, then theory is a way of looking at or contemplating the methodological paths taken in a course of study. While both methods and theories are operative in all forms of interpretation, in the case of iconographic exegesis questions concerning interpretive method have garnered much more attention than those pertaining to visual theory.

This tendency to concentrate on method rather than theory is especially evident in two recent contributions from the second wave of iconographic exegesis. One such example is LeMon's *Yahweh's Winged Form in the Psalms*. In his opening chapter, LeMon offers much needed critical analysis of methods of iconographic exegesis and how they establish congruency

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cultural (Mitchell, "Showing Seeing," 171). In this sense, visual culture entails both the visual materials produced by a given culture as well as the ways of seeing (or visuality) generated by those materials. This understanding is evident in Whitney Davis's recent volume, *A General Theory of Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). For further discussion of the concept of visual culture and its relationship to biblical studies and religio-historical research, see chapter 6 of this study.

[11] De Hulster offers a similar assessment when he points out "the lack of explicit theoretical reflection in studies linking texts with images" (*Iconographic Exegesis,* 2). However, in my estimation the aim of de Hulster's project is far more focused on questions of biblical iconographic method rather than underlying theories of visual representation.

[12] Ibid., 39.

between certain ancient Near Eastern images and biblical texts.[13] As an example, LeMon calls into question the way in which William P. Brown draws upon the work of Jan Assmann to assert that metaphors in the Psalter and ANE art, like text and image in Egyptian solar hymns, share an iconic content that can be said to be so closely related as to express equivalent thoughts.[14] However, as LeMon rightly points out, in making this claim Brown seems to overgeneralize the relationship between ANE images and biblical texts because, in part, he fails to adequately account for the cultural particularity and contextual specificity of both objects of study.[15] Whereas text and image are organically bound together in the hieroglyphic script of Egyptian solar hymns, such is not the case with respect to textual materials from ancient Israel and art objects from Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, or even Canaan.

In LeMon's estimation, Brown's methodology treats the diverse repertoire of ANE images as reflecting something of a homogenous system of thought and, as such, does not provide a way to evaluate the relative—and sometimes contrasting—influence of different regional iconographies on the metaphors evident in the Psalter. By way of response, LeMon offers a five-step interpretive procedure that provides a more judicious way of establishing a level of congruency between ANE art and figurative language in the Hebrew Bible.[16]

While LeMon's interpretive procedure makes an important contribution to iconographic exegesis, his methodological recommendations might be further advanced through a more explicit and sustained engagement with relevant issues in visual theory. For instance, even though LeMon offers a sophisticated treatment of issues related to the cultural and contextual particularity of images and texts, his methodology is far less concerned with what are equally important questions about the nature of visual-verbal interactions, whether on a particular artifact or between images and texts from the same cultural and geographical context.

Such considerations have long since attracted the scrutiny of philosophers, art historians, literary critics, and visual culture theorists alike. A parade example is found in Mitchell's extensive treatment of approaches to the text-image relationship in his companion volumes, *Iconology* (1986)

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[13] LeMon's discussion focuses primarily on William P. Brown's use of ancient iconography in his study of various metaphors in the Psalms (Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* [Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2002]).

[14] Ibid., 14. See also Jan Assmann, *Egyptian Solar Religion in the New Kingdom: Re, Amun and the Crisis of Polytheism* (trans. Anthony Alcock; New York: Kegan Paul International, 1995).

[15] LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 16–22.

[16] Ibid., 24.

and *Picture Theory* (1994).[17] In both of these studies, Mitchell raises important questions about visual-verbal interactions in contemporary visual media that might also be asked about ancient artifacts. These include: Do visual and verbal forms of representation in the ANE operate under the same system of signification? Would a text and an image that ostensibly describe the same thing, even if on a single artifact, necessarily have the same impact on or convey the same meaning to its viewers? What sort of relationship (dependent, independent, inter-dependent, etc.) customarily exists between corresponding visual and verbal data and how might the dynamics of this relationship shift depending on the type of text (captions, epigraphs, historical annals) or type of image (monumental reliefs, seals, coins) at hand? To what extent does textuality enter into the logic of visual display, and, conversely, visuality into the function of written materials?

That these and others questions about the image-text relationship remain mostly unasked in LeMon's otherwise insightful volume does not suggest that his methodology lacks insight or rigor.[18] Nevertheless, engaging theories about the text-image relationship would serve to further nuance future studies that attempt to read biblical literature in light of ancient art.

A similar assessment can be offered with respect to de Hulster's revised dissertation, *Iconographic Exegesis and Third Isaiah*. Unlike LeMon, de Hulster explicitly foregrounds the need for theoretical reflection about visual representation. In fact, in his opening pages de Hulster promises "a thorough theoretical basis for iconographic exegesis."[19] From there, de Hulster goes on to direct several sub-sections of his third chapter to key theoretical issues, such as why images are important objects of study (§3.1), what images are (§3.4.1), and in what disciplines images are typically studied (§3.7.1). However, while the inclusion of such issues raises crucial questions that typically go unasked in biblical studies, the discussions themselves are in need of further development, especially as they relate to visual theory. To be fair, de Hulster acknowledges the limited scope of his theoretical reflections for the purpose of his project. Instead, he focuses more of his attention on *procedures* for image analysis (so, again, *method*), as is evident in the extended discussion in §3.7.2–5.[20] In this way, while de Hulster does more to surface questions about visual theory than most

[17] Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); and idem, *Picture Theory*.

[18] It should be noted that LeMon does cite Mitchell's *Picture Theory* in one instance (*Yahweh's Winged Form*, 192). However, in this case LeMon draws on Mitchell in order to explain the "multistability" of meaning in Yahweh's winged form in Psalm 17 (*Yahweh's Winged Form*, 192), not the image-text relationship *per se*, which is Mitchell's central focus in *Picture Theory*. For further discussion of this topic, see chapter 3 of this study.

[19] See de Hulster, *Iconographic Exegesis*, 2.

[20] For de Hulster's appraisal of the theoretical scope of his project, see ibid., 40, n. 63; 48.

scholars interested in iconographic exegesis, the largest contribution of his study lies in its refinements of methodological procedure.

However sophisticated de Hulster's insights might be, it still would be fruitful to apply pressure to the theoretical principles that underlie his proposed procedures. As an example, de Hulster devotes only one paragraph to the question of "What is an image?" and does little more than establish that an image is a "mediated representation."[21] Though such a description is fitting in a general sense, much more might be said not only about what an image is but also, and perhaps more importantly, about how images signify and what images do. In fact, as was the case with theories concerning the text-image relationship in the discussion of LeMon's study, numerous art historians and visual culture theorists have looked more closely at the nature of visual signs, the function of images in religious culture, and the implications of visual response in specific social and historical contexts.[22]

One such example can be found in the work of David Morgan, a religious studies scholar who specializes in art and visual culture. Through his various articles and books, Morgan explores the dynamics of visual representation with regard to contemporary religious imagery.[23] By examining how popular religious art, such as Warner Sallman's famous twentieth-century depictions of Jesus, shapes the beliefs, practices, and attitudes of viewers, Morgan does more than just decode the symbolic meaning of specific pieces of art. Instead, Morgan's interpretive analysis exhibits a shift from the study of images as an artist- or object-centered discourse to what he calls a practice-centered discourse that looks at "the social apparatus that creates and deploys the object, the gaze that apprehends the image in the social operation of seeing."[24] While Morgan still attends closely to traditional iconographic and art historical concerns, he also explores how "the rituals, epistemologies, tastes, sensibilities, and cognitive frameworks that inform visual experience help construct the worlds people live in and care

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[21] de Hulster, *Iconographic Exegesis*, 48–49. I treat this question in more detail in §5.1.

[22] While not engaging biblical materials, Zainab Bahrani's work with ancient Mesopotamian art represents an insightful treatment of the semiotics of ancient Near Eastern visual representation. As will be more fully discussed in subsequent chapters, Bahrani's work is invaluable for biblically-focusd iconographic exegesis that is sensitive to the sorts of questions raised above. See Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (Archaeology, Culture, and Society; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); eadem, *Rituals of War: The Body and Violence in Mesopotamia* (New York: Zone Books, 2008).

[23] See especially David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Imagery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) and idem, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Cultural in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[24] Ibid., 32.

about."[25] Similar questions might just as well be asked about ancient images and ancient viewers. As such, Morgan's analysis could be re-deployed toward better understanding the power and meaning of ancient visual artifacts as well as their impact on ancient viewers.[26]

What is evident from this brief survey of recent contributions from both LeMon and de Hulster is this: even the most methodologically advanced treatments of iconographic exegesis only sparingly scrutinize crucial questions about the nature of visual representation and visual culture. In contrast, Mitchell, Morgan, and numerous others more explicitly anchor their interpretive work in critical theories about these and related topics. Specifically, their research is characterized not only by analyses of particular visual objects but also a concern for "the practices and habits that rely on images as well as the attitudes and preconceptions that inform vision as a cultural act."[27] In other words, beyond elucidating what images "say" (i.e., their content), scholars interested in visual theory and visual culture tend to explore what images do, how they are put to use, and why they solicit from their viewers such powerful responses of devotion and hatred, fascination and fear. This is not to say that biblical scholars are uninterested in such matters or are unaware of recent developments in the study of visual culture. I simply mean to suggest that, up to this point, visual theory has only played a minor role in the scholarly discourse about images in biblical studies.[28]

In view of this situation, the next step in the advancement of iconographic exegesis would be for scholars to attend more closely to visual theory as a critical lens for interpreting biblical literature in light of ancient art. This would involve a more detailed exploration of how theories about visual representation and visual culture can further refine methodological procedures and enhance interpretive practices when it comes to the study of

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[25] Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 25.

[26] However, it should be noted that if biblical iconographers have been relatively uninterested in visual theory, visual culture theorists have been equally inattentive to ancient art. In fact, visual culture theorist James Elkins contends that the diverse field of visual culture studies is united by its lack of interest in older cultures and ancient pictorial materials (*Visual Studies*, 17). Nevertheless, a consideration of visual semiotics and image analysis with respect to iconographic exegesis is not without precedent. Eleanor Ferris Beach's dissertation critically engages the work of Panofsky and Susanne K. Langer in developing a procedure for interpreting pictorial artifacts in the study of the Hebrew Bible ("Image and Word: Iconology in the Interpretation of Hebrew Scriptures" [Ph.D. diss.; Claremont Graduate School, 1991]).

[27] Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 3.

[28] For a notable exception, see Uehlinger, "Approaches to Visual Culture and Religion: Disciplinary Trajectories, Interdisciplinary Connections and Some Suggestions for Further Progress," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 27 (2015): 384–422.

Israelite religion, figurative language in the Bible, and various other aspects of biblical scholarship.

1.3. Prospects for a Visual Hermeneutics

If something of a scholarly lacuna has been left in biblical studies with regards to critical reflection on visual theory, then what might be potentially gained by attempting to fill this gap? Why not just "get to work" on analyzing ancient images and interpreting biblical texts? The primary purpose of this study is not to present a comprehensive theory of ancient visual culture for specialists in art history—though I hope such scholars might benefit from my attempt to apply contemporary visual theory to ancient artifacts. Neither do I wish to enter into an abstract discussion of theory for theory's sake—though I intend to offer a much more sustained reflection on the nature of visual representation and visual culture than can be found in other contributions to iconographic exegesis. Nor is my main intention to develop a step-by-step procedure that applies in the same way to every biblical studies project that engages ancient art—though I am expressly interested in issues of method and application throughout this study. Rather, my primary interest has to do with hermeneutics and, in particular, *visual* hermeneutics.

In my use of the term "hermeneutics," I follow Hans-Georg Gadamer—and thus Friedrich Schleiermacher—in referring to "the art of understanding" texts (or images). This "art" not only entails rules or procedures for interpretation (i.e., methods) but also a critical consideration of the preliminary principles and epistemological rationale upon which interpretive procedures are based (i.e., theory).[29] In focusing on the issue of hermeneutics and not just method, my research attempts to chart a different course than most second wave biblical iconographers. While these scholars have done much to describe the methodological "hats" (i.e., interpretive procedures) worn by biblical scholars interested in ancient art, I attempt to lift these hats, so to speak, in order to look more closely at the heads (i.e., mental processes and epistemological reasoning) upon which certain methods rest.[30] As a result, through a sustained reflection on a number of key issues

[29] See, for instance, the helpful discussion of a definition of hermeneutics found in Anthony C. Thiselton's *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009) 1–4.

[30] In other words, noticing that an individual is wearing a baseball hat as opposed to a chef's hat tells us something about what sort of job that person does and how he goes about doing it (i.e., method). However, hats tend to rest upon heads, and it is in knowing how those heads, or brains, conceptualize the rules of their respective work (i.e., theory) that we can better understand why different hats are worn and how they differ. Or, to flex the analogy further, one needs to know about more than just hats (and perhaps heads) to understand

in visual theory, I hope to surface a hermeneutical framework that can draw attention to and make a revision of the sorts of questions scholars ask and issues scholars raise about how one reads (ancient) images and sees (biblical) texts in light of those images.[31]

In developing a more explicit notion of visual hermeneutics, the present study seeks to uniquely contribute to the practice of iconographic exegesis—and the field of biblical studies more broadly—in at least three distinct ways.

(1) First, I aim to prompt iconographic exegesis *to become a more self-critical discipline in both its methods and practices*. Such an endeavor can be understood as responding to the challenge Old Testament scholar J. J. M. Roberts put forth to iconographic exegesis nearly three decades ago when he said: "This [iconography] is perhaps the most promising direction taken in recent biblical scholarship's use of the comparative method. One can only hope that scholars will begin to give serious attention to non-epigraphic evidence in a more self-critical fashion."[32] In my estimation, theory plays an indispensable role in fostering this self-critical attitude insofar as it creates, as Morgan puts it, a "critical distance between what scholars see and what they think about what they see" when considering specific objects of study.[33] As such, the challenge Roberts puts forth demands that scholars refine certain practices and perspectives as they apply to the interpretation of visual and verbal data in the ancient (and modern) world.

Towards this end, each of the next five chapters attempts to relate a critical question in visual theory to specific issues in biblical scholarship and religio-historical research. For instance: What is visual literacy and how does this concept clarify the importance of images as a language of communication in the ancient world? (ch. 2); How have scholars conceptualized the nature of the image-text relationship and in what ways do these theories inform our interpretation of objects that combine visual and verbal data? (ch. 3); How do linguistic and non-linguistic signs convey meaning in different ways and what are the implications for methods of visual analysis

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the embodied and contextual nature of performance. For instance, gestures by differently-"hatted" people might be identical for, say, a dancer and someone directing an airplane landing, even as both acts mean something quite different in their respective social and cultural contexts.

[31] Something analogous might be said about the value of considering any number of other hermeneutical perspectives, be they feminist/womanist, postcolonial, or the like. While I do not mean to suggest that visual hermeneutics and, say, womanist hermeneutics are completely parallel concepts, they both involve the consideration of reading strategies that are attentive to theories about how "texts" (be they verbal or visual) construct meaning and the active role readers/viewers play in encountering such meaning.

[32] Roberts, "The Ancient Near Eastern Environment," 95.

[33] Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 26.

in biblical studies? (ch. 4); How does the history and theory of visual response shed new light on the nature, power, and agency of ancient art objects? (ch. 5); How might a consideration of visual practices and religious ways of seeing influence our understanding of important topics in Israelite religion, including the study of Israelite aniconism and the search for Yahweh's cult image? (ch. 6).

By addressing each of these questions, I not only offer a critical engagement with visual theory but I also show how such theories can raise new questions and open up new avenues of research in biblical studies and other related fields. In some cases, this reflection involves critiquing certain aspects of previous contributions to iconographic exegesis. My intention, however, is not to dismiss the value of these studies nor to suggest that their many fruitful insights are invalidated by my hermeneutical framework. Rather, in these cases I wish to demonstrate how taking visual theory seriously can complement and further nuance the ground-breaking work of scholars associated with the Fribourg School and the second wave of iconographic exegesis.

(2) The second major goal of this study is to prompt biblical scholars interested in ancient art to be *more attentive to insights and ideas generated in other disciplines*. As already indicated, crucial conversations about the nature of visual representation have long since surfaced in the realm of art history and now are increasingly being taken up in the field of visual culture studies.[34] I consistently argue that biblical studies has much to gain by explicitly engaging in interdisciplinary research that draws upon insights from other fields in the humanities and social sciences. Although such interdisciplinary "border crossings" are promising, they also can be fraught with difficulty and can occasionally feel more like hostile raids than cultural-exchange programs. As a result, it is imperative that this sort of research is carried out in careful and conscientious ways, judicious in its attempt to show how and where bridges might be constructed between the questions and concerns of biblical scholarship and those of visual theory.

In order to do so, each of the five main chapters mentioned above (chs. 2–6) focuses on what is only a narrow slice of visual theory. These chapters do not attempt to offer an extensive literature review of visual culture stud-

[34] Much ink has been spilt on introductory volumes and general readers on visual culture. Some of the most helpful contributions include the following: Margarita Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual After the Cultural Turn* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005); Elkins, *Visual Studies* (2003); Michael Ann Holly and Keith P. F. Moxey, *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies* (Williamstown, Mass.: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2002); Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed., *The Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998); idem, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999); and Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith P. F. Moxey, *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations* (Hanover, N.H.: Published by University Press of New England for Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

ies nor do they provide an exhaustive discussion of any single topic in visual theory. Rather, they attempt to identify persistent concerns in visual theory that seem most relevant to the interpretive interests of biblical scholars. In each of these chapters, I situate the topic at hand with respect to the work of one or two theorists: James Elkins, visual literacy (ch. 2); Mitchell, the image-text relationship (ch. 3); Nelson Goodman, visual semiotics (ch. 4); David Freedberg and Alfred Gell, the power and agency of images (ch. 5); and David Morgan, visual practices and religious ways of seeing (ch. 6). While these topics are treated by a host of other scholars as well, the theorists I have chosen to focus on are widely regarded as leading figures in that specific area of study. By concentrating on the work of a small set of theorists, I hope to make these theory-related discussions more accessible for the general reader and more conducive to focused and productive interdisciplinary inquiries.

(3) This study also intends *to make a persuasive case for the role and importance of images in the field of biblical studies*. In this sense, my case for theory in iconographic exegesis doubles as a case for images in biblical scholarship. Among other things, I hope to convince scholars who have not already made a visual turn in their own research of why images matter in text-based disciplines in the first place. I emphasize throughout this study how ancient art offers a data set that is at least as valuable as comparative written sources when it comes to understanding the conceptual world that lies behind the biblical literature. This hermeneutical perspective is summed up poignantly by Keel and Uehlinger when they suggest that "[a]nyone who systematically ignores the pictorial evidence that a culture has produced can hardly expect to recreate even a minimally adequate description of the culture itself."[35]

In my estimation, biblical scholars should receive Keel and Uehlinger's comment in *GGG* as a type of "altar call" to the study of images. This need not mean that every biblical scholar should be as interested in images (or theory, for that matter) as I am. Nor do I mean to imply that ancient art is equally relevant to every avenue of biblical scholarship. Yet, by highlighting the role and importance of images in the ancient world, I hope to raise greater awareness about how and why images should matter in contemporary work in the field of biblical studies. While text-alone approaches might retain their pride of place in biblical scholarship, the visual hermeneutics that I sketch out here attempts to challenge the *a priori* assumption that textual materials are the only—or even the most important—data source when it comes to analyzing the language and conceptual background of the Bible. Put differently, I hope to further the visual turn in biblical studies not only by prompting biblical iconographers to think more about visual theory but

[35] Keel and Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (trans. Thomas H. Trapp; Minneapolis, Fortress, 1998 [German original: 1992]), 11.

also by urging other biblical scholars to think more about how ancient visual materials might contribute to their research on a host of topics and themes.

1.4. Format of the Study

Throughout this study, I develop a visual hermeneutics through three distinct but interrelated analytical approaches, each of which attempts to apply visual theory to iconographic exegesis.

First, throughout this study I utilize *inductive surveys* of several widely appropriated methods in iconographic exegesis in order to more clearly discern the operative assumptions and perspectives that have guided this field of study. In contrast to other past surveys of methods in iconographic exegesis, the purpose of this analysis is neither to trace the historical development of the field nor to provide a novel typology of iconographic approaches.[36] Rather, the inductive surveys employed in this study aim to demonstrate how methods of iconographic exegesis rely upon certain presuppositions about visual representation and visual culture, even though these ideas often remain unstated or under-scrutinized.

In most cases, these inductive surveys introduce each of the main chapters of the study. While not exhaustive in scope, these surveys demonstrate how and why theory is already and always present in the interpretive methods and practices of iconographic exegesis. As a result, my research does not so much introduce theory into iconographic exegesis as it attempts to highlight the theories that are already there. The inferences drawn from these inductive surveys bring into sharper relief some of the interpretive goals and intellectual presuppositions that have guided the development of this field of study in the past several decades. In addition, these surveys also draw attention to the need for more critical reflection on visual theory in related areas of inquiry, including ANE art history, archaeology, metaphor theory, and Israelite religion. In this sense, while this visual hermeneutic is primarily geared toward scholars already interested in iconographic exegesis, the questions and issues it raises have the potential to advance literary, art-historical, and religio-historical research more broadly.

The second method of analysis that I employ consists of putting forward *constructive proposals* for how visual theory might revise interpretive

[36] Such analyses have been fruitfully carried out in other recent volumes. For instance, de Hulster's dissertation, "Illuminating Images," offers a thorough assessment of the historical development of the Fribourg School, with special attention paid to changes in methodological procedure. LeMon's revised dissertation, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, provides an insightful typology of approaches to ancient iconography (see n. 6 above). Weissenrieder and Wendt ("Images as Communication") catalogue four fundamental approaches, or intellectual orientations, to methodologies of image analysis more broadly.

methods. I suspect that one of the reasons why many scholars remain somewhat skeptical about the role of theory in biblical studies is that theoretical reflection is often carried out as an abstract intellectual exercise whose primary purpose is to problematize and/or deconstruct past approaches. In contrast, my own approach to theory strives to be more constructive in its aims. Toward this end, I conclude each of my chapters with several specific suggestions concerning how visual theory might revise, expand, and/or further nuance widely utilized approaches in iconographic exegesis and other related areas of religio-historical research. These proposals do not by any means do away with insights generated in past contributions offered by members of the Fribourg School or the second wave of iconographic exegesis. Rather, I intend for my methodological suggestions to continue, and in some cases, slightly redirect, how these scholars study biblical literature in light of ancient art and visual culture.

Finally, throughout my study I attempt to provide a series of *generative examples* that demonstrate how visual hermeneutics might shed new light on important interpretive issues in biblical exegesis and/or the study of Israelite religion. Thus, at every point possible, I endeavor to avoid a type of "theory-wonking" in which critical reflection is disconnected from a consideration of concrete examples.[37] Instead, in each chapter I explore how insights from visual theory might apply to a particular question in biblical research or to the analysis of specific art objects from the ancient world.

For instance, chapter 2, "Visualizing Literacy: Images as a Language of Communication," draws on theories about images as media in order to reassess recent debates about textual literacy rates in ancient Israel. Chapter 3, "Drawing Distinctions: The Image-Text Relationship," explores how Mitchell's theories about the image-text dialectic and the metapicture might apply to the interpretation of certain ancient artifacts, including those that incorporate image and text in the same visual frame. The goal of chapter 4, "Picturing Representation: Images, Meaning, and Visual Analysis," is to suggest several ways in which ancient art objects generate meaning that goes beyond what is typically accounted for by most iconographic methods. Chapter 5, "Animating Art: The Life of Images and the Implications of Visual Response," uses theories about the power and agency of images to better understand the nature of the ṣalmu in ANE visual culture and instances involving the theft and destruction of divine and royal images. Chapter 6, "Seeing is Believing: Visual Culture and the Study of Israelite Religion," offers an extended consideration of religious visual culture and

[37] I borrow the term "theory-wonking" from David Morgan, who is also suspicious of projects that pursue theory for its own sake ("Introduction: The Matter of Belief," in *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* [ed. David Morgan; New York: Routledge, 2010], 12). For further discussion, see Morgan's cautionary remarks about the role of theory in religious visual culture research in *The Sacred Gaze*, 25–27.

its applicability to two key topics in the study of Israelite religion: the nature and extent of Israelite aniconism and the search for Yahweh's cult image.

Finally, in the concluding chapter I synthesize these reflections on visual theory into nine clearly delineated interpretive principles. Taken together, these principles outline a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies, and in doing so, offer a more self-critical framework for reading images and seeing texts.

Chapter 2

Visualizing Literacy: Images as a Language of Communication

"I want to read you a painting
I want to tell you the
Mesh of colors woven
Speak the colors you create
And, transposing evidence
Against the space of art,
Ask you to draw me a poem."[1]

2.1. Encountering Images in a Text-Based Discipline

Outside of its recent (though still partial) turn toward images, the academic study of the Bible has traditionally been a discipline characterized by a rather singular focus on words and texts. While interpretive methods and goals vary, the Bible is typically studied as a text in its own right and with a literary-minded interest about its sources, genres, editing, rhetorical features, philological background, and inter-textual allusions. Comparative approaches to biblical research tend to be no less logocentric. In an effort to illuminate the historical, cultural, and religious background of the biblical world, scholars look primarily, if not exclusively, to comparative literary sources from the ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman worlds, be they in the form of epigraphic remains, treaties, legal codes, epic poetry, or a variety of other literary genres. To be sure, there are some exceptions to these trends. For example, scholars interested in the reception history of the Bible have given attention to biblically-themed works of art—say, altar pieces from medieval churches or paintings from Rembrandt or other artists. In these studies, images are taken seriously as a visual medium of interpretation and thus offer primary evidence of how readers have negotiated the meaning of Scripture in specific cultural and historical contexts. But aside

[1] Brian J. Tessier, *The Poet and the Painter* (Xlibris, 2010; online publication: http://bookstore.xlibris.com/Products/SKU-0084666017/The-Poet-and-the-Painter.aspx)

from these excursions into reception history, biblical research has, by and large, been something of an "artless" endeavor.[2]

These text-alone approaches are not without warrant or value. The Bible is, after all, a collection of books, and so it is appropriate to ask of it literary-minded questions. Be that as it may, text-alone methodologies have persisted in the field of biblical studies in spite of the fact that over the past two centuries a wealth of ancient visual artifacts have been discovered—seals, amulets, coins, wall reliefs, tomb paintings, mosaic floors, and so forth. In fact, comparative approaches to biblical research has remained text focused even though visual remains far outnumber literary remains in the archaeological record of Syria-Palestine and the rest of the ancient Near Eastern world.[3] Put differently, while evidence suggests that images were at least as prominent—and perhaps quite a bit more so—as texts in the ancient world, scholars have continued to study the Bible in light of other written materials.

It has only been recently that some scholars have begun to call into question the validity of approaches to the study of the Bible that rely exclusively on comparative textual materials. One poignant example is found in Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger's influential volume, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God* (1992; Eng. trans. 1998). In their study of ancient Israelite religion in light of iconographic data, Keel and Uehlinger contend that any reconstruction of the historical and cultural background of the Hebrew Bible must take into account not only non-biblical sources but also non-textual ones.[4] Indeed, their conviction that visual materials are

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[2] Text-alone methodological approaches are not unique to biblical scholarship. Visual cultural theorist Martin E. Jay highlights logocentric biases throughout Western intellectual discourse, especially in the twentieth century (*Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993]). Numerous other scholars have explored similar trends within other academic disciplines. See, for instance, Chris Jenks, ed., *Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Stephen W. Melville and Bill Readings, eds., *Vision and Textuality* (London: Macmillan, 1995); and David Michael Kleinberg-Levin, ed., *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). As a result of the emergence of visual cultural studies, a growing number of scholars in the humanities and social sciences are now calling for increased attention to visual materials in their own fields. As just one recent example, Anna Grimshaw criticizes the scarcity of interest in visuality and visual materials in much modern anthropological field work (*The Ethnographer's Eye: Ways of Seeing in Anthropology* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001]). In contrast to some past work in her field, Grimshaw advocates new ways of thinking about the importance of images in anthropological methods and practice.

[3] Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (trans. Thomas H. Trapp; Minneapolis, Fortress, 1998 [German original: 1992]), 4.

[4] Much of the same could be said about reconstructing the historical and cultural background of the New Testament.

indispensible to religio-historical research is unequivocal: "Anyone who prefers to work exclusively with texts (e.g., to reconstruct 'Canaanite' religion using nothing but textual sources from Ugarit) ought to get little or no hearing."[5] Mark S. Smith strikes a similar chord when, in *The Early History of God* (1990), he describes text-alone approaches to religio-historical research as "working with a puzzle that is missing many or most of its pieces."[6] Such a view is now being taken up by a growing number of biblical scholars, and as a result, text-alone approaches to the study of Israelite religion and the conceptual background of biblical literature are gradually loosing currency.[7]

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[5] Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 11.

[6] Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), xxix.

[7] See, for instance, Uehlinger, ed. *Images as Media: Sources for the Cultural History of the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean: 1st Millennium BCE* (OBO 175; Fribourg: University Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000); Karel van der Toorn, ed., *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (CBET 21; Leuven: Peeters, 1997); Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context* (ConBOT 42; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1995); Izak Cornelius, *The Iconography of the Canaanite Gods Reshef and Baʿal: Late Bronze Age I Periods (c. 1500–1000 BCE)* (OBO 140; Fribourg: University Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994); Benjamin Sass and Christoph Uehlinger, eds., *Studies in the Iconography of Northwest Semitic Inscribed Seals: Proceedings of a Symposium Held in Fribourg on April 17–20, 1991* (OBO 125; Fribourg: University Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993); and Pierre Amiet, *Corpus des cylindres de Ras Shamra – Ougarit II: Sceaux-cylindres en hématitie et pierres diverses*, *RSO* IX (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1992).

The most exhaustive (and most recent) use of iconography in religio-historical research of Israel-Palestine is on display in the four volume compendium edited by Silvia Schroer and Keel that covers the time period from the twelfth century through the Persian period (*Die Ikonographie Palästinas/Israels und der Alte Orient: Eine Religionsgeschichte in Bildern* [4 vols.; Fribourg: Academic Press, 2005–2011]). A similar tendency to draw on iconographic data is evident in recent studies of figurative language in the Hebrew Bible. For instance, numerous biblical scholars have investigated biblical metaphors in light of corresponding ANE art in order to better understand the conceptual background of certain literary imagery. See, for instance, Joel M. LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form in the Psalms: Exploring Congruent Iconography and Texts* (OBO 242; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010); Izaak J. de Hulster, *Iconographic Exegesis and Third Isaiah* (FAT 2/36; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009); Brent A. Strawn, *What is Stronger Than a Lion?: Leonine Image and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (OBO 212; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005); William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002); and Martin G. Klingbeil, *Yahweh Fighting from Heaven: God as Warrior and as God of Heaven in the Hebrew Psalter and Ancient Near Eastern Iconography* (OBO 169; Fribourg: University Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999).

Yet, *why* exactly are images so important? Answering this question is crucial to the conviction held by Keel, Uehlinger, Smith, and numerous others that iconographic data ought to be utilized as more than just "nice pictures" that accompany otherwise text-based studies. Put differently, if images are to matter to contemporary biblical scholars then a more thorough account must be made of how and why images mattered to ancient viewers in the first place.

Recent contributions to iconographic exegesis have only begun to address this issue in an explicit manner. The operative, though often unspoken, premise is that all material remains, whether textual or visual, are a fundament part of a given culture's symbol system. Human cultures express themselves and negotiate meaning through both text-based and image-based symbols, not to mention a variety of embodied practices and rituals. This general observation is no less true of religion. As Keel and Uehlinger put it, "religious concepts are expressed not only in texts but can be given a pictorial form on items found in the material culture as well."[8] Another way of putting the matter is that images, like texts, can function as a type of language capable of being produced and read as a meaningful and effective form of communication. In fact, it is possible to think of textual and iconographic data as dual reflexes—one verbal, the other visual—of the conceptual world of a given culture.[9] Thus, if one is interested in gaining insight into the sign context and cultural background of the biblical world, it would be necessary to work (at least) with both literary and iconographic materials.

This understanding about why images matter informs Keel and Uehlinger's critique of text-alone approaches to religio-historical research:

> Conclusions drawn from an interpretation of Bronze Age texts discovered in northern Syria, and the religio-historical hypotheses developed from such evidence, cannot be used uncritically to explain the religious history of Canaan during the second millennium and, though it has happened repeatedly, certainly not to clarify what happened in Israel during the first millennium.[10]

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[8] Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 10. A similar idea is echoed in de Hulster's work with methods of iconographic exegesis. De Hulster asserts, "Images as part of the archaeological record constitute an important source, which the historical approach can employ to get more information about the act of communication (of which the text is part) and its background" (*Iconographic Exegesis*, 24).

[9] For this language, see Strawn, "'A World Under Control': Isaiah 60 and the Apadana Reliefs from Persepolis," in *Approaching Yehud: New Approaches to the Study of the Persian Period* (ed. Jon L. Berquist; SemeiaSt 50; Atlanta: SBL, 2007), 114. See also Strawn's discussion of the importance of iconographic data in his treatment of the origins and development of leonine imagery and its use in metaphors about Yahweh (*What is Stronger than a Lion*, 19–20).

[10] Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 11.

The essence of Keel and Uehlinger's appraisal is that when reconstructing the historical background of Israelite religion or interpreting literary imagery in the Hebrew Bible, scholars should give the greatest consideration to material remains, regardless of whether they are textual or visual, that are most geographically and chronologically proximate to the cultural context of the biblical texts under investigation. In this view, Syro-Palestinian glyptic art from Iron Age III would be a more pertinent source of comparative data for understanding the cultural and religious context of a post-exilic prophetic text such as Second Zechariah than, say, thirteenth-century literary remains from Ras Shamra.[11] What Keel and Uehlinger are calling into question, then, are methodologies that *a priori* assume biblical texts are best understood in light of other textual data or written documents *regardless of their geographical and chronological proximity to the readers and writers of the Hebrew Bible itself.*

Keel and Uehlinger's methodological remarks are insightful and offer a necessary corrective to comparative studies that rely exclusively on textual materials. However, what Keel and Uehlinger do not explicitly address are crucial questions about the relative importance of images *within* a given cultural context: Do visual and textual data from the same geographical and chronological context—or indeed, from the *same artifact*—function in the same way or to the same degree as vehicles of communication? In what ways were images intended to be "read" and how did they function as a language in their own right? To what extent does the visual culture of ancient Israel provide the most relevant comparative data for understanding the conceptual background of the Hebrew Bible and the figurative language integral to its religious beliefs and theological imagination?

[11] Yet this has not been the practice of much previous research on Second Zechariah. To name but one example, Eric and Carol Meyers follow Paul Hanson ("Zechariah 9 and the Recapitulation of an Ancient Ritual Pattern," *JBL* 92 [1973]: 37–59) in claiming that Zechariah 9 draws upon ancient Canaanite textual materials in order to inform its description of Yahweh as Divine Warrior. In their view, the fact that Zechariah 9 borrows ancient mythic elements "should be viewed as part of Second Zechariah's general tendency to echo the language of authoritative literature" (Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [Anchor Bible 25C. New York: Doubleday, 1993], 150). While Hanson and the Meyers are certainly right to suggest that the Divine Warrior motif is present in ancient mythic literature, their explanation of *how* Zechariah 9 is textually dependent upon these sources lacks specificity. For instance, what sort of mechanism of textual dependency must be at work in order to assume that ancient mythic imagery from thirteenth-century Ugarit is "quite appropriate" to Second Zechariah at the beginning of the fifth century? In addition to conflict myth texts, are there other sources, perhaps non-textual, that might also inform the figurative language of Zechariah 9? For further discussion of this issue, see Ryan P. Bonfiglio, "Archer Imagery in Zechariah 9:11–17 in Light of Achaemenid Iconography," *JBL* 131 (2012): 507–27.

The aim of this chapter is to address these and related questions about how and why images mattered in ancient Israel. I will proceed along several related lines of inquiry. First, I bring into focus recent debates about textual literacy in ancient Israel as a way of reassessing the importance of reading and writing as modes of expressing and transmitting ideas, whether religious or otherwise (§2.2). Second, I introduce the idea of "visual literacy" as a conceptual framework for understanding the importance of ancient iconography as a vehicle of communication and, more specifically, as a type of language (§2.3). In forwarding the notion of visual literacy I seek to highlight not only the ways in which visual objects—especially in the form of minor art—would have functioned as the "mass media" of the ancient world but also how visual and textual literacies might have interacted as complementary modes of communication on specific material remains. In the final section of this chapter, I explore the methodological implications of this discussion about visual and textual literacies by suggesting several ways in which the field of biblical studies might more fully account for the importance of ancient images as a language of communication (§2.4).

2.2. Textual Literacy in Ancient Israel

It is rather axiomatic for most contemporary readers of the Hebrew Bible to presume that ancient Israelites formed, expressed, and transmitted ideas through words and texts. At the level of popular religious culture, these assumptions can be detected in references to the Jewish community as a "people of the book" and to Christianity as a "religion of the book."[12] In scholarly circles, interest in textual materials has dominated the academic study of the Hebrew Bible and related areas of religious and theological research in part because scholars have presumed that writing and reading

[12] Such designations have functioned as a meaningful source of identity and belonging for many Jews and Christians. See, for instance, David L. Jeffrey, *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans with The Institute for Advanced Christian Studies, 1996); and Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky et al., eds., *People of the Book: Thirty Scholars Reflect on Their Jewish Identity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996). Whatever these terms have come to mean for Jews and Christians today, conceptions about what books are and how they are produced, transmitted, used, and valued, have changed considerably over time. This is especially true in the wake of the emergence of a print culture beginning in the fifteenth century C.E. and, much more recently, the explosion of various internet technologies including electronic books, blogs, and countless forms of social media. While Judaism and Christianity are still rightly regarded as religions of the book, the texts so central to these traditions are now accessed, searched, read, and distributed in a variety of formats that hardly resemble the traditional printed-and-bound book. See, for instance, Timothy K. Beal, *The Rise and Fall of the Bible: The Unexpected History of an Accidental Book* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011).

are the principle mechanisms of preserving and communicating religious thought, whether in ancient or modern contexts.[13]

Somewhat ironically, these presuppositions are not completely absent from research in the area of iconographic exegesis. As will be discussed in the conclusion to this chapter (§2.4), many scholars interested in the study of ancient art still utilize methodological procedures that presume that the most relevant comparative data for understanding the conceptual background of the Hebrew Bible come from textual sources. Thus, while those interested in iconographic exegesis tend to look to images for *additional* comparative evidence when studying the Bible, few explicitly have called into question the relative importance of texts as vehicles of communication in the ancient world.

In the last several decades a growing number of scholars have begun to critically reassess the importance of reading and writing in ancient Israel, especially as it pertains to the evaluation of textual literacy rates.[14] A sizeable bibliography is now available on this topic, but this research has rarely been put in conversation with the theory, methods, and practices of iconographic exegesis. Re-assessing the issue of textual literacy can make an important contribution to the development of a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies by shedding light on the extent to which reading and writing were the only, or even the primary, vehicles of communication in the ancient world.

2.2.1. Assessing the Evidence

In recent years, considerable debate has emerged concerning the role and importance of textual literacy in ancient Israel. In general, two opposing positions are evident. Scholars who maintain what might be called a "high-

[13] Logocentric tendencies in biblical scholarship underlie several classic theories about the composition of the Hebrew Bible. For instance, Julius Wellhausen's formulation of the Documentary Hypothesis posited the existence of early and continuous literary sources for the Pentateuch (*Prolegomena to the History of Israel* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994 [German original: 1878]). Similarly, Martin Noth's theory of the Deuteronomistic History imagined the author of Joshua–Kings as a type of historiographer who selectively drew on and arranged various sources and traditions, many of which were textual (*Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien* [Halle Saale: M. Niemeyer, 1943]). Even though both of these theories have been extensively revised and reformulated, the underlying assumptions about the role and importance of written records remain largely intact.

[14] For a helpful review of several recent contributions to this research, see William M. Schniedewind, "Orality and Literacy in Ancient Literature," *RelSRev* 26 (2000): 327–32. A more thorough appraisal of the significance of specific epigraphic data is offered by Chris A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010).

literacy" position posit that knowledge of writing and reading was a widespread phenomenon in ancient Israel from at least the tenth century B.C.E. onwards.[15] In this view, literacy is understood to play an important role not only in scribal activity in the temple and palace but also in the everyday life and communication of the general populace. In contrast, scholars who favor a "low-literacy" position conclude that anything more than the most basic skills in reading and writing were limited to a very small group of scribes and upper class elites.[16] Even if, as David W. Jamieson-Drake has argued, the use and production of texts increased with the rise of the Judean monarchy in the seventh and early-sixth centuries, the low-literacy camp contends that written materials continued to play a relatively minor role as a vehicle of communication for vast segments of Israelite society.[17] While space prohibits a lengthy review of this research, it will be instructive for the purposes of this study to review key evidence in this debate and what it might suggest about textual literacy in ancient Israel.

One of the chief problems that besets the high-literacy position is the fact that the archaeological record of ancient Israel, unlike some of its ANE neighbors, lacks evidence of massive textual archives, great libraries, royal monuments, or other signs that would suggest that the production and preservation of written documents was a defining characteristic of the cul-

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[15] Representative of the "high-literacy" perspective are William F. Albright, "Discussion," in *City Invincible: A Symposium on Urbanization and Cultural Development in the Ancient Near East* (ed. C. H. Kraeling and R. M. Adams; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 94–123; Gabriel Barkay, "The Iron Age II–III," in *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel* (ed. Amnon Ben-Tor; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 302–73; Richard Hess, "Literacy in Iron Age Israel," in *Windows into Old Testament History: Evidence, Argument, and the Crisis of "Biblical Israel"* (ed. V. Philips Long, David W. Baker, and Gordon J. Wenham; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 82–102; idem, "Writing about Writing: Abecedaries and Evidence for Literacy in Ancient Israel," *VT* 56 (2006): 342–46; idem, "Questions of Reading and Writing in Ancient Israel," *BBR* 19 (2009): 1–9; Alan Millard, "An Assessment of the Evidence for Writing in Ancient Israel," in *Biblical Archaeology Today: Proceedings of the International Congress on Biblical Archaeology, Jerusalem, April 1984* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1985), 301–12; idem, "The Knowledge of Writing in Iron Age Palestine," *TynBul* 46 (1995): 206–17; and William M. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[16] The "low-literacy" camp is represented by James L. Crenshaw, *Education in Ancient Israel: Across the Deadening Silence* (New York: Doubleday, 1998); Philip R. Davies, *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox, 1998); William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*; and Ian M. Young, "Israelite Literacy: Interpreting the Evidence (Parts 1–2)," *VT* 48 (1998): 239–53, 408–22; and idem, "Israelite Literacy and Inscriptions: A Response to Richard Hess," *VT* 55 (2005): 565–68.

[17] David W. Jamieson-Drake, *Scribes and Schools in Monarchic Judah: A Socio-Archeological Approach* (Sheffield: Almond, 1991).

ture. Many high-literacy proponents would counter by noting that the absence of evidence need not signal evidence of absence. Alan Millard, for instance, explains the lack of royal monuments in ancient Israel as a mere "archaeological accident," and as a result he finds it methodologically acceptable to "adduce scribal practices well-attested in one area [i.e., Assyria] to help reconstruct the situation in another [i.e., Israel] where the evidence is poorer."[18]

Such conclusions are certainly not implausible. Yet Millard's analogical approach is problematic on several levels. First, the comparative data that Millard cites does not unambiguously affirm the presence of high literacy rates in adjacent cuneiform cultures. Peter Machinist makes this very point when he contends that the ability to access and read archived texts in Assyria would have been limited to a very small group of trained scribes and officials.[19] In other words, large archives of texts need not imply high levels of literacy. Second, even in cultures where archives are plentiful, texts were often written and collected for reasons other than conveying information even to those who were literate. Studies of Neo-Assyrian archives indicate that texts could function as a type of votive offering to a deity or even as a memorial intended to preserve a king's name, or perhaps his military victory, for posterity.[20] In both cases, the texts in question were not written primarily in order to be read—or at least, not to be read by humans.[21] In fact, the notion that all texts function as a means of communica-

[18] Millard, "Knowledge of Writing," 213–14. Of course, if parchment was used as the chief medium for writing, it would not be surprising to find such a dearth of textual remains in the archaeological record. However, this, too, is an argument from silence. In contrast to Millard's "archaeological accident" defense, Kenneth A. Kitchen proposes how specific political, cultural, ideological, and environmental factors help explain the lack of monumental writing in ancient Israel, as well as other nations along an east-west belt from the Aegean Sea through the Levant ("Now You See It, Now You Don't! The Monumental Use and Non-use of Writing in the Ancient Near East," in *Writing and Ancient Near Eastern Society* [ed. Piotr Bienkowski, Christopher Mee, and Elizabeth Slater; LHBOTS 426; London: T & T Clark International, 2005], 175–87).

[19] Peter Machinist, "Assyrians on Assyria in the First Millennium B.C.," in *Anfänge politischen Denkens in der Antike: Die nahöstlichen Kulturen und die Griechen* (ed. Kurt Raaflaub; Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1993), 101.

[20] See, for instance, Mogens Weitemeyer, "Archives and Library Technique in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Libri* 6 (1956): 229–31; and Stephen J. Lieberman, "Canonical and Official Cuneiform Texts: Towards an Understanding of Assurbanipal's Personal Tablet Collection," in *Lingering Over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran* (ed. Tzvi Abusch, John Huehnergard, and Piotr Steinkeller; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 305–36.

[21] Even Schniedewind, who generally affirms higher literacy rates, admits that writing was not always, or even primarily, used for person-to-person communication. Instead, he underscores the fact that writing had a numinous power in the ancient world and in fact

tion between human agents is far more reflective of the practices of modern cultures than ancient ones. Here again, the presence of written records does not unambiguously imply high literary rates.

Furthermore, while there is evidence that suggests ancient Israel, albeit to a lesser degree, collected and archived texts, it is far from evident that it exhibited an "archival mentality."[22] For instance, a horde of sixth-century clay bullae, likely used to seal rolled-up scrolls, have been discovered well within the remains of an Iron Age IIC residential building in southeastern Jerusalem.[23] Though the documents themselves no longer exist, these bullae seem to provide indirect evidence of a collection of written materials. Yet as previously mentioned, evidence of a collection of texts does not necessarily imply that these texts were accessed and read by the general public. In fact, the practice of sealing rolled-up scrolls with clay bullae would have made it logistically impractical to consult the textual data on the documents with any regularity since, in order to be read, the seals would have had to be broken and the scroll unfolded. Thus, while the discovery of this horde of clay bullae does affirm that textual archives were produced and, at least to some extent, valued by ancient Israelite communities, it does not necessarily clarify how many people could read or write in those communities.

One could object to this conclusion noting that in some cases a copy of a sealed document might have been made available on the outside of the scroll in order to make the contents more publically accessible. A practice similar to this seems to be implied in Jer 32:10–15. Here, a sealed deed of purchase is accompanied by an "open copy" or "open deed" (ספר הגלוי, v. 14). Even if this reference suggests that written documents could be read without breaking their seals, it is important to note that at least in Jeremiah 32, no mention is made of the "open deed" being read or publically scrutinized.[24] Instead, emphasis is placed on the fact that, in the presence of wit-

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"was used to communicate with the divine realm by ritual actions or formulaic recitations in order to affect the course of present or future events" (*How the Bible Became a Book*, 25).

[22] Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (LAI; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 62–63.

[23] For an introduction to this collection of clay bullae, see Yigal Shiloh and David Tarler, "Bullae from the City of David: A Hoard of Seal Impressions from the Israelite Period," *BA* 49 (1986): 196–209. A larger horde of 255 inscribed clay bullae, most likely from the early postexilic period, provides similar data (see Nahman Avigad, *Bullae and Seals from a Post-Exilic Judean Archive* [Qedem 4; Jerusalem: Institute of Archaeology, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1976]), although the utility of this collection is limited by the fact that it was obtained on the antiquities market.

[24] Furthermore, Jeremiah 32 does not provide any evidence that Jeremiah or the other witnesses did anything more than sign the document. A scribe such as Baruch might well have written the document itself. As will be discussed below (cf. § 2.2.3), the level of skill required to sign one's name on a document is hardly evidence of a high level of literacy.

nesses, Jeremiah instructs Baruch to store the documents in a clay jar "in order that they [the documents] may last for a long time" (לְמַעַן יַעַמְדוּ יָמִים רַבִּים, v.14). In this sense, it is the public *preservation* of the documents themselves not their public reading that is important. The preservation of this deed of purchase might be understood as a type of sign-act that conveys the message that God will preserve the Israelites so that they once again can possess land in Judah. As a result, Jeremiah 32 hardly provides evidence that ancient Israelites collected and utilized texts in ways that are analogous to how literate societies today archive and access various types of legal records, historical documents, or literary works.

Despite the relative lack of evidence for either archives of texts or archival mentalities, the material record of Syria-Palestine does bear witness to a continuous presence of writing throughout the Iron Age. Numerous abecedaries, inscribed seals, graffiti-like inscriptions, administrative ostraca, and at least some literary compositions have been discovered. However, what they indicate about textual literacy is widely debated. The high-literacy position assumes that a culture's quantity of writing is directly proportional to its rate of literacy.[25] For instance, in reference to the relative abundance of inscribed seal impressions discovered in Syria-Palestine, Richard Hess concludes: "When taken together with hundreds of additional pieces of writing, there is evidence that throughout Iron Age 2, and extending back to Iron Age 1 (c. 1200–1000 B.C.E.), every region and every level of society had its writers and readers."[26]

Perhaps so. But how *many* writers and readers were there, and which segments of Israelite society did such writers and readers come from? Rather than affirming widespread literacy, it is quite possible, as Ian Young has argued, that a large quantity of written materials originated from a small number of literate people.[27] Christopher Rollston offers a similar assessment of the evidence when he says, "a small coterie of professional scribes during any chronological horizon could produce very large numbers of inscriptions without much difficulty."[28]

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[25] The assumption that evidence of writing is tantamount to evidence of widespread literacy is apparent in numerous works from the high-literacy camp. An example of this is Phaswane Simon Makuwa's dissertation, "Pre-Exilic Writing in Israel: An Archaeological Study of Signs of Literacy and Literary Activity in Pre-Monarchical and Monarchical Israel" (Ph.D. diss., University of South Africa, 2008).

[26] Hess, "Writing about Writing," 345. Schniedewind is also optimistic about high literacy rates in ancient Israel, but concludes that a "textual revolution" of sorts did not occur until the seventh century. In his view, this rise in literacy was in response to the rapid development of the Judean state, especially under Josiah. The result was that "basic literacy became commonplace, so much so that the illiterate could be socially stigmatized" (*How the Bible Became a Book*, 91).

[27] Young, "Israelite Literacy," 240.

[28] Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*, 133.

While this sort of critique is often aimed at the type of conclusions Hess and Millard draw in their various publications, it might also serve as a pertinent response to the argument forwarded in David W. Jamieson-Drake's *Scribes and Schools*. In noting the increased amount of epigraphical evidence in sites dependent on Jerusalem in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E., Jamieson-Drake concludes that literacy rates significantly increased as the state of Judah rose in prominence. Thus Jamieson-Drake, not unlike Hess and Millard, makes a rather straightforward connection between quantities of written materials and rates of literacy. The more relevant question, however, concerns the contexts in which these writings were located. In my estimation, while Jamieson-Drake is right to conclude that the development of the Judean monarchy led to increased scribal and administrative activities, including the production of written records, it does not follow that significant portions of the general populace would have acquired the ability to read and write. This is a possible, but not necessary, conclusion.

2.2.2. Rates and Social Range of Textual Literacy

What, then, might be concluded about literacy rates and its social range in ancient Israel? William V. Harris, who studies textual literacy in the Greco-Roman world, admits that providing numerical estimates of ancient literacy is a "risky task."[29] Nevertheless, he attempts to draw general conclusions through an extensive comparative analysis of the nature and function of written materials across cultures. Specifically, Harris notes that in studies of literacy rates in early-modern and modern Europe, all but the most elementary writing and reading skills are limited to a small group of professional or social elites unless certain preconditions are filled, such as the existence of an extensive network of schools, the technology to mass produce inexpensive texts, and an ideology that sees literacy as a worthwhile goal for political, religious, or other reasons.[30] In Harris's view, many of these conditions were not met in ancient Greece and Rome, and even less so, the ancient Near Eastern world.[31]

Even still, determining whether these preconditions are met might also be considered a "risky task." For instance, questions pertaining to the prevalence of schools in ancient Israel is widely debated among biblical scholars. Some in the low-literacy camp, such as James Crenshaw, detect a notable absence of references both to schools and to a widespread system of

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[29] Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, 7, 11–12.

[30] Ibid., 11–12. Elsewhere, Harris puts the matter succinctly: "Literacy on a large scale is the product of forces such as did not exist in antiquity" (327).

[31] In fact, Harris believes that the classical world achieved a "much higher level of literacy than the [ancient] Near East" (ibid., 331).

education in the biblical evidence. As a result, he strongly challenges André Lemaire's earlier suggestion that a large system of "state schools" came into existence under Solomon's administration.[32] In contrast to Crenshaw, Eric William Heaton cautions against seeing this absence of evidence as concrete proof that schools did not exist.[33] Yet even if Lemaire and others are correct in their suggestion that ancient Israel possessed a sophisticated and widespread network of schools, this would only satisfy one of the conditions Harris believes is necessary to produce a highly literate society. For instance, while the presence of a robust educational system is not in doubt for ancient Greece and Rome, most agree that literacy rates remained quite low in these cultures. In fact, Harris contends that even though both ancient Greece and Rome had linear alphabets as well as a growing body of written documents, no more than 5–15% of their general population was literate.[34]

In view of Harris's findings, it would be implausible to conclude that literacy rates were high in ancient Israel or that its social range was widespread on the basis of the existence of abecedaries or other simple inscriptions.[35] In fact, in his research on ancient literacy, Michael C. A. MacDonald contends that even within societies that relied on texts for various economic or administrative purposes, large "oral enclaves" of illiterate people most likely still existed.[36] As a result, while evidence of writing is

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[32] See Lemaire, *Les écoles et la formation de la Bible dans l'ancien Israël* (OBO 39; Fribourg: Éditions universitaires; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981).

[33] Eric William Heaton, *The School Tradition of The Old Testament: The Bampton Lectures for 1994* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994).

[34] Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, 12–24, 114, 267. This is not to deny that in many ways linear alphabets make language acquisition easier. However, as Jack Goody points out, pictographic or ideographic languages tend to have a *lower* threshold for partial literacy since viewers with little to no training might be able to recognize, say, a pictogram of a bird as having some semantic connection with the concept of a bird. In this sense, an alphabet represents a more abstract symbol system insofar as its individual components represent phonemes, not individual words or concepts (Jack Goody, *The Power of the Written Tradition* [Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 2000], 132–51).

[35] Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*, 128. See also Rollston's evaluation of the Tel Zayit abecedary and how it contributes to questions about Israelite literacy ("The Phoenician Script of the Tel Zayit Abecedary and Putative Evidence for Israelite Literacy," in *Literate Culture and Tenth-Century Canaan: The Tel Zayit Abecedary in Context* (ed. Ron E. Tappy and P. Kyle McCarter, Jr.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 61–96.

[36] Michael C. A. MacDonald, "Literacy in an Oral Environment," in *Writing and Ancient Near Eastern Society*, 49–118. By way of a modern analogy, if one were to discover in a lecture hall of a university a large amount of sheet music or a musical score, one need not conclude that a high portion of the students in that university were musically literate—that is, able to read musical notation, let alone compose musical scores. Rather, it is more likely the case that those musical compositions reflect the work of a relatively small segment of students who are majoring in music or attending a Conservatory within the larger university system.

undeniable in ancient Israel, it does not suggest that written texts were the primary vehicle of communication for the vast majority of people.[37]

Moreover, the picture that obtains from the epigraphic remains of Syria-Palestine is one in which only a small segment of Israelite society was able to read and write. The quality of script and consistency of orthography found on these artifacts, but especially the administrative ostraca from Arad and Samaria, are suggestive of the work of highly trained professionals.[38] Furthermore, the inscriptions themselves almost exclusively refer to scribes or elite officials as being able to read and write. It should be noted that some scholars in the high-literacy camp adduce several more ambiguous examples (typically the Meṣad Ḥashavyahu letter, Lachish Letter 3, and inscriptions from Kuntillet ʻAjrud and Khirbet el-Qom) in order to suggest that non-scribes were textually literate. For instance, Hess contends that there is no evidence that knowledge of reading and writing was "restricted to one class and not available to another level of society."[39] However, evidence for non-elite or non-professional readers and writers is far from conclusive and has been convincingly refuted elsewhere.[40]

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[37] In fact, it is quite possible that literacy rates were even lower than 5–15% during the Persian period. Noting that the conditions in which textual literacy might flourish diminished along with the population of Yehud, Jon Berquist argues that "literacy rates were so low that written law made little sense for most people" (*Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995], 137).

[38] Rollston, *Writing and Literacy,* 129–32. For a discussion of Arad Ostracon no. 24 (also known as the Ramath-Negeb Ostracon), see Yohanan Aharoni, "Three Hebrew Ostraca from Arad," *BASOR* 197 (1970): 16–42. For a discussion of the ostracon from Samaria, see George Andrew Reisner et al., *Harvard Excavations at Samaria* I (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924), 239.

[39] Hess, "Literacy in the Iron Age," 92.

[40] See especially Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*, 128–32. Of the several oft-mentioned counter-examples, two are of note. The first of these is the Meṣad Ḥashavyahu letter (also known as Yavneh Yam Ostracon 1). Hess and Schniedewind understand the ostracon to have been written by a peasant reaper who in the letter makes an appeal to the fortress's governor concerning what he perceives to be the unjust confiscation of his cloak (cf. Hess, "Literacy in Iron Age Israel," 93; Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 103). While not implausible, other interpretations are possible. For instance, Rollston notes that the reaper might not have been a peasant but might have been a supervisor who was in charge of overseeing the reaping process in general (*Writing and Literacy*, 130). Alternatively, since Yavneh Yam was a Judean fortress, it is also possible that the ostracon was written by an army scribe on behalf of the reaper (cf. Joseph Naveh, "A Hebrew Letter from the Seventh Century B.C.," *IEJ* 10 [1962]: 136). In both scenarios, the actual writer of the letter would not have been a lower class peasant.

The second frequently mentioned example of literacy possibly extending beyond elite circles is the Lachish Letter 3. In that letter, Ya'ush, a senior army officer, chides the lower-ranking Hosha'yahu for not properly handling a previous missive by asking, "Don't you know how to read a letter?" (l' yd'th / qr' spr). While this translation is widely accepted

The Hebrew Bible also primarily associates textual literacy with a small segment of Israelite society. For instance, in his 1998 article on Israelite literacy, Young catalogues the various types of people who are said to read and/or write in the biblical text. The vast majority of these individuals are scribes, priests, prophets, officials, and kings.[41] While these references should not be accepted uncritically as straightforward proof of who could read and write, the Hebrew Bible generally mirrors the epigraphic remains: the skills associated with textual literacy are primarily associated with scribes and other elite officials.

Nevertheless, as with the epigraphic materials there are a few ambiguous references in the Hebrew Bible that leave some room for supposing that literacy existed beyond scribal or elite circles.

In several instances, the Hebrew Bible depicts members of the general populace, or even "all Israel," reading and writing (cf. Deut 6:9; 11:20; 21:1, 3; Neh 9:3). However, the semantic range of the verbs "to read" (√*qr'*) and "to write" (√*ktb*) leave considerable doubt about whether the subjects of these verbs are always the ones engaging in the processes of reading and writing. For instance, the root √*ktb* includes the notion of having someone write on one's behalf (as in dictation). This connotation might well be in view in Jer 36:2 where God instructs Jeremiah to "take a scroll and write on it all the words I have spoken." Without any concern that he has deviated from God's instruction, Jeremiah later calls upon his scribe,

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(see, for instance, J. C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions I: Hebrew and Moabite Inscriptions* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973], 39; Lemaire, *Inscriptions Hébraïques I* [Paris: Cerf, 1977], 100–1; and Dennis Pardee, *Handbook of Ancient Hebrew Letters* [Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1982], 84), Frank Moore Cross instead reads, "You did not understand it. Call a scribe!" (Cross, "A Literate Soldier: Lachish Letter III," in *Biblical and Related Studies Presented to Samuel Iwry* [ed. A. Kort and S. Morschauser; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1985], 43). Cross reads the final h in yd'th as an object suffix rather than the plene spelling of the second person masculine singular perfect suffix –tā. He also vocalizes spr as sōpēr ("scribe") not sēper ("letter"). In favor of the more common translation, the idiom yd' spr ("to know book") in Isa 29:11–12 seems to refer to being literate, thus making it more plausible that l' yd'th / qr' spr in Lac 3:8b–9a refers to someone being illiterate, albeit through the addition of another word for reading, qr' (Young, "Israelite Literacy," 410). Nevertheless, both translations indicate that Ya'ush was accusing Hoshaʿyahu of being illiterate. In defense of his ability to read, Hosha'yahu counters that he has never needed the services of a professional scribe. Rollston argues that this is quite plausible, since a military officer such as Hosha'yahu, who was of high enough rank to have received proprietary information about the military expedition of his commander, Konyahu son of 'Elnathan, might well have found it advantageous to his military position to have obtained some formal training in reading and writing (*Writing and Literacy*, 130). Thus, if Lachish Letter 3 is an example of non-scribal literacy, it almost certainly is not proof that literacy extended to anyone outside of an elite level of society.

[41] Interestingly, God is also said to write (Exod 31:18; 34:1) and might indeed be seen as "the writer *par excellence*" (Young, "Israelite Literacy," 244–53).

Baruch, to write the words God had spoken (36:4). Likewise, the root √*qr'* can mean to have something read for/to someone. This appears to be the case in 2 Kgs 22:16 where Josiah is credited with having read "the words of the book" even though it is Shaphan who reads aloud to the king from this document (22:10).

In light of the wider semantic range of √*ktb* and √*qr'* it would be difficult to agree with Roland de Vaux's view that the instructions to "write [the commandments] on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates" (Deut 6:9; 11:20) presumed that at least one member of every family possessed the ability to write.[42] On the whole, it is tenuous to assume that references to the general population—or even prophets and kings—writing or reading in the Hebrew Bible support notions about widespread literacy in ancient Israel.

Similar caution should also be used with respect to the two instances in the Hebrew Bible in which a *na'ar* is said to write (Judg 8:14; Isa 10:19). Drawing on translations of *na'ar* as "young man" (Judg 8:14) or "child" (Isa 10:19), some scholars contend that these passages support the idea that most Israelites were literate since even their youth knew how to write.[43] However, the term *na'ar* can also refer to a class of officials who were high ranking administrators or private stewards.[44]

Neither does *na'ar* always refer to a young person. In 2 Sam 9:9–10, Saul's *na'ar*, Zibna, is said to have 15 sons! Even in Isa 10:19, where *na'ar* seems to be rightly translated as "child," the rhetorical point of the passage

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[42] Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (trans. John McHugh; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 49.

[43] Carl H. Kraeling and Robert M. Adams, eds., *City Invincible: A Symposium on Urbanization and Cultural Development in the Ancient Near East held at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, December 47, 1958* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 119.

[44] The term *na'ar*, not unlike other age terms used in the Hebrew Bible, is rather imprecise. See the important discussions in Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Family Tree in First Temple Israel," in *Families in Ancient Israel* (ed. Leo G. Perdue, et al.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997) and John MacDonald, "The Status and Role of the Na'ar in Israelite Society," *JNES* 35 (1976): 147–70. In addition, while this term may indicate age, it is also used in the Hebrew Bible for other purposes. This is the position taken in the two most extensive works on *na'ar* in the Hebrew Bible: Hans-Peter Stähli, *Knabe, Jüngling, Knecht: Untersuchungen zum Begriff [na'ar] im Alten Testament* (BBET 7; Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1978); and Carolyn S. Leeb, *Away from the Father's House: The Social Location of na'ar and na'arah in Ancient Israel* (JSOTSup 301; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000). For a more recent discussion see, Strawn, "Jeremiah's in/Effective Plea: Another Look at na'ar in Jeremiah I 6," *VT* 55 (2005): 366–77. On Hebrew seals, *na'ar* can refer to a servant or steward, as is argued by Avigad in "New Light on the Na'ar Seals," in *Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Memory of G. Ernest Wright* (ed. Frank Moore Cross, Werner E. Lemke, and Patrick D. Miller Jr.; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), 294–300.

hardly can be used to support the idea of widespread literacy. Specifically, when the prophet says that "the remnant of the trees of his forest will be so few that a child (*na'ar*) can write them down" his message is clear: while a fully literate scribe would be needed to record the countless number of trees in a healthy forest, the remnant of Israel's "forest" will be so meager that even a mere (and perhaps illiterate) child could record them.

2.2.3. Types of Textual Literacy

Assessing textual literacy rates entails determining not only *how many* people were literate in ancient Israel but also *what* type of literacy those people possessed. In both modern and ancient contexts, the notion of literacy can be understood to encompass a wide spectrum of reading and writing skills, ranging from the most rudimentary understandings of written statements and basic writing skills to a more sophisticated knowledge of grammar, syntax, and composition.[45] In modern contexts, the recognition of various "levels" of literacy is commonplace, especially in elementary and secondary education where a student's reading comprehension skills are often described in terms of what "grade level" at which he or she is reading. These assessments attempt to chart different stages or degrees of literacy according to expected outcomes associated with various levels of training.[46]

Different levels or types of literacy were likely operative in the ancient world as well. Rollston, for instance, defines literacy as "the ability to write and read, using and understanding a standard script, a standard orthography, a standard numeric system, conventional formatting and terminology, and with minimal errors of composition or comprehension."[47] According to

[45] In a 2004 position paper, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) offered the following definition of literacy: "Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts" ("The Plurality of Literacy and Its Implications for Policies and Programs," UNESCO Education Sector Position Paper 13, 2004; online at: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001362/136246e.pdf; accessed: 4/24/2016). While the UNESCO definition of literacy should not be uncritically applied to ancient Israel, it does underscore the importance of identifying which particular skills are implied by the notion of literacy.

[46] However, it is possible—and perhaps all too common—that students move on to higher levels of education while still reading at a much lower reading level. In fact, James L. Mursell has shown that up to fifth and sixth grades, reading skills in America steadily improve, but after that, the rate of improvement flattens out considerably. According to Mursell, the reason for this is not that students reach their natural limit of reading effectiveness but that they no longer are trained or challenged to improve. See James L. Mursell, "The Defeat of the Schools," *The Atlantic Monthly* 163 (1939): 353–61.

[47] Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*, 127.

this understanding, the skills required to read a *lmlk* seal or sign one's name to a contract would hardly constitute literacy, or alternatively, would only constitute "semi-literacy" or a certain type of "functional literacy."

Even if literacy is defined so as to include a lower threshold of skills than is evident in Rollston's definition, it would nevertheless remain the case that being able to read or even just recognize a name, patronymic, or brief phrase would require a skill level that differs markedly from the type of literacy needed to read a contract or more sophisticated literary composition such as a biblical scroll. Thus, even if the presence of inscribed seals suggests that many Israelites possessed some rudimentary form of functional literacy, it need not imply that the majority of Israelites would have been able to read legal codes, religious poetry, or historical records.

2.2.4. Alternatives to Textual Literacy

Drawing on similar conclusions about the limited rates, range, and types of textual literacy in ancient Israel, a number of Hebrew Bible scholars have turned their attention to what might have been alternative mechanisms of communication. Chief among these suggestions is the idea that orality or spoken forms of communication played a critical role in the preservation and transmission of religious belief and other forms of cultural knowledge.

Interest in the oral background of the Hebrew Bible emerged with the pioneering work of Hermann Gunkel in the early-twentieth century. Gunkel's work primarily examined the relationship of oral forms to their social settings. However, while Gunkel did draw attention to the importance of orality and oral traditions, he tended to associate Israel's oral culture with an unsophisticated period in history prior to the formation of biblical literature. In this sense, Gunkel persisted in seeing the Hebrew Bible emerging from, and perhaps as a result of, a time in Israelite history in which scribes, schools, and literate authors/readers played a predominant role.

Most form critics since the time of Gunkel have tended to concentrate on identifying and analyzing the genre and social settings of certain literary (i.e., *textual*) units. However, more recently Susan Niditch has shown a renewed concern for the importance and influence of orality as a cultural phenomenon.[48] Niditch suggests that "large, perhaps dominant, threads in Israelite culture were oral, and . . . literacy in ancient Israel must be under-

[48] Likewise, in the mid-twentieth century, a group of Scandinavian scholars, including Ivan Engnell, Eduard Nielsen, and H. S. Nyberg, explored parallels between features of biblical literature and Icelandic oral traditions. While their work did not have a far-reaching impact, their emphasis on the importance of oral traditions and oral culture is echoed by more recent scholars.

stood in terms of its continuity and interaction with the oral world."[49] Niditch not only argues that verbal communication was the primary vehicle of transmitting religious traditions but also that elements of an oral mentality or "oral register" left a mark on the stylistic features of the Hebrew Bible itself.[50] In this perspective, the various oral traditions and oral practices operative in ancient Israel can be construed as a type of oral literacy that displaced, or at least accompanied, textual literacy as a primary vehicle of communication.[51]

This emphasis on oral literacy offers a much-needed corrective to theories that uncritically assume that ancient Israel was predominantly a text-based culture. Nonetheless, Niditch's research still reflects a rather word-centered outlook. Even though she shifts attention from textuality to orality, Niditch still sees words (not images) as the main currency for transmitting religious belief and cultural knowledge. While twentieth-century linguists and philosophers are right to point to differences between written and spoken language, from the perspective of iconographic exegesis, oral and textual literacies might be seen as two sides of a rather logocentric coin.[52] As a result, while oral literacy likely played a critical role in Israelite society and the transmission of certain religious beliefs and biblical traditions, it does little to challenge the assumption that words (whether spoken or written) were the *sine qua non* in ancient Israelite communication.[53]

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[49] Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word*, 1.

[50] In her use of the term "oral register," Niditch draws on the work of John Foley who notes the way in which various features of a culture's oral mentality can influence how texts are structured and styled (John Foley, *Oral Tradition in Literature: Interpretation in Context* [Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1986]). As a result, Niditch explores the interplay between orality and literacy in various texts in the Hebrew Bible. Simon Parker likewise explores the effect of orality on how texts are written, but his focus is primarily on epigraphic data from Syria-Palestine (*Stories in Scripture and Inscriptions: Comparative Studies on Narratives in Northwest Semitic Inscriptions and the Hebrew Bible* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997]).

[51] In *Oral World and Written Word*, Niditch approaches the relationship of orality and literacy as a type of continuum. In a similar fashion, sociolinguist Deborah Tanner rejects earlier perspectives that presumed that orality and literacy were competing forces and instead affirms that they are complementary vehicles of communication. See Deborah Tannen, "The Myth of Orality and Literacy," in *Linguistics and Literacy* (ed. William Frawley; New York: Plenum, 1982), 37–50.

[52] Beginning with Ignace Gelb in 1952, the term "grammatology," which has gained traction among linguists, literacy critics, and philosophers, has been used to broadly refer to the analysis of writing systems, and more specifically, the relationship between spoken and written language. Perhaps most famous among these is Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1976 [1967]).

[53] Neither does the idea of oral literacy address the ways in which religious beliefs and practices are expressed through embodied actions and ritual performances.

2.2.5. Conclusions

Although this brief survey does not address every facet of the scholarly literature on textual literacy, it has surfaced several significant challenges to the view that reading and writing were the only, or even the primary, vehicles of mass communication in ancient Israel. To be specific, the archaeological remains of Syria-Palestine do not support the picture of a culture in which a diverse amount of textual materials were either carefully archived or regularly accessed by non-scribes or non-elite officials. Neither does the extant epigraphic data suggest that the vast majority of ancient Israelites possessed anything more than the most rudimentary skills in reading and writing. If, as argued above, textual literacy rates in ancient Israel were on par with other ancient cultures with linear alphabets such as ancient Greece or Rome, then it would be untenable to conclude that texts were an important vehicle of communication for much more than approximately 10% of the general population.

Such conclusions are not meant to suggest that textual materials were entirely arcane or that writing and reading played an inconsequential role in ancient Israelite religious culture. Textual materials, no doubt, did play a role in transmitting religious beliefs and ideologies among certain segments of Israelite society. Furthermore, references to book finding (as in 2 Kings 22–23) and book writing/copying motifs (as in Deut 10:1–4; 27:3; Josh 4:20–24; 8:30–35; 24:25–27) function rhetorically, if not historically, to affirm the authority and antiquity of certain beliefs in Israelite religion.[54]

Nevertheless, for the vast majority of ancient Israelites from the early Iron Age down into the late Persian period, literacy remained—to borrow terminology from Jack Goody's study of ancient reading and writing—a "minority phenomenon."[55] That is to say, while ancient Israel certainly had its share of readers and writers, reading and writing texts represented only

[54] It might also be noted along with Schniedewind that the Torah, and even the concept of revelation itself, became increasingly "textualized" in the centuries during and after the Persian period. For instance, in the Book of Jubilees, written in the mid-second century, writing plays an important role in God's revelation to Moses at Sinai. Not only is Moses commanded to write a book (Jub 1:5), but he is given angelic helpers who bring divine tablets to Moses (Jub 1:29), thus making it the case that Moses copies that which was written in heaven. For a more detailed discussion of the "textualization" of the Torah, see Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 118–38.

[55] Goody, *The Power of the Written Tradition*, 134. Although Goody's research does not address in detail the circumstances of ancient Israel, his overall conclusion is that prior to the nineteenth century, textual literacy would have been a minority phenomenon in *any* society.

one mechanism, and perhaps a sparsely used one, for communicating ideas and transmitting cultural knowledge.[56]

2.3. Visual Literacy and Iconographic Exegesis

As already noted, words, whether written or oral, represent only one aspect of the symbol system of most cultures. Images can likewise express beliefs, transmit ideologies, and provoke the imagination. Rather than being understood as a type of decorative "folk art," the images that are so abundant in the archaeological record of Syria-Palestine function as a type of communicative media that actively shapes the ways of seeing or thinking of their viewers.[57] Put differently, images constitute a type of language no less than texts. Thus, if images mattered as a type of language in ancient Israel, then it might be fruitful to speak of *how* they mattered in terms of *visual literacy*—i.e., the extent to which ancient viewers looked to, read, and utilized images as a symbol system capable of conveying political, cultural, or religious knowledge.

2.3.1. Definitions

What, then, is visual literacy? Most basically, the notion of visual literacy draws on a common way of talking about communicating through textual materials in order to describe the process of communicating through visual materials. This perspective is perhaps most prominently on display in James Elkins's edited volume, *Visual Literacy* (2008). In his contribution to

[56] Echoing a similar assessment, albeit in a far more provocative manner, John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed suggest that Jesus was an illiterate peasant (Crossan and Reed, *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts* [San Francisco: Harper, 2001], 30–31). In making this claim, Crossan and Reed attempt to underscore the point that literacy rates would have been quite low in Palestine even in the first century. Catherine Hezser likewise argues for low literacy rates among Jewish males in Roman Palestine (*Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine* [TSAJ 81; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2001]).

[57] Unfortunately, prior to the rise of the Fribourg School in the 1970s, biblical scholars often treated visual artifacts as decorative elements that either accompanied or illustrated textual materials. There are, however, some exceptions. For instance, James B. Pritchard's *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament* (2nd ed. with suppl.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969 [1954]) and Hugo Gressmann's *Altorientalische Bilder zum Alten Testament* (2nd ed.; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1927 [1909]) both catalogue a great variety of visual materials from the archaeological record of the ancient Near Eastern world. Nevertheless, while these studies take great interest in visual materials, neither offers a nuanced analysis and appropriation of such imagery for the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible.

this volume, W. J. T. Mitchell notes that visual literacy compares "the acquisition of skills, competence, and expertise [in reading images] . . . to the mastery of language and literature."[58] Like other scholars in Elkins's *Visual Literacy*, Mitchell approaches images as a type of language that exhibits a system of (visual) vocabulary, (compositional) syntax, and (pictorial) grammar. Mitchell notes how the concept of visual literacy might be understood as an intentional category error, an attempt to transcend the boundaries of both poetry and painting by speaking of the "language" of images or the linguistic power of the visual arts. From Horace's dictum *ut pictura poesis* to Tessier's reference to reading a painting cited in the epigraph to this chapter, the concept of visual literacy allows one to talk about images not only in terms of language, but also *as* a language that can be parsed, read, taught, and translated.[59] Seen in this light, visual literacy can be flexed in several different ways and for several different purposes.

Most commonly, visual literacy is used to refer to the presence of minimal competencies related to the recognition of or appreciation for famous works of art. As Elkins points out, this understanding of visual literacy is often on display in introductory art history courses whose broad pedagogical scope is not unlike a "Physics for Poets" class insofar as they seek to provide a basic survey of a topic to students from other disciplines.[60] As a valuation of one's capacity to recognize and remember certain corpora of images, visual literacy is often closely associated with human memory and cognitive psychology.[61] However, acquiring this type of visual literacy does

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[58] Mitchell, "Visual Literacy or Literary Visualcy?" in *Visual Literacy* (ed. James Elkins; New York: Routledge, 2008), 11. A similar trope is operative in Aloïs Riegl's *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts* (trans. Jacqueline E. Jung; New York: Zone Books, 2004 [German original: 1966]). Riegl, a representative of the Vienna School of art history, utilizes a linguistic approach in order to describe the formal features of art and the driving forces behind the evolution of artistic principles. In this sense, Riegl is not unlike a linguist in his interest in identifying root elements (or visual phonemes) in and behind artistic style and development.

[59] See especially W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *The Language of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[60] James Elkins, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 126. In a fascinating example of this sense of "visual literacy," Elkins (ibid., 125–26) notes how a 2001 *Vancouver Sun* article describes the goal of Prince William's course in art history at the University of St. Andrews in terms of achieving "visual literacy" (Stewart Muir, "No Easy Ride in Ancient School: Prince Must Achieve 'Visual Literacy' in Four-Year Arts Degree Program," *Vancouver Sun*, September 24, 2001, A8).

[61] See, for instance, Lionel Standing, "Learning 10,000 Pictures," *Quarterly Journal for Experimental Psychology* 25 (1973): 207–22; Stephen Madigan, "Picture Memory," in *Imagery, Memory, and Cognition* (ed. John C. Yuile; Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1983), 65–90; and Johannes Engelkamp, "Gedächtnis für Bilder," in *Bild-Bildwahrnehmung-Bildverarbeitung: Interdisziplinäre Beiträge zur Bildwissenschaft* (ed. Klaus Rehkämper;

not entail any detailed knowledge of visual interpretation or art historical theory and thus might be considered a type of "semi-(visual) literacy" or "functional (visual) literacy" (cf. §2.2.3).

A related sense of visual literacy is evident in popular cultural criticism. In this understanding, a general familiarity with the visual arts contributes to a broader sense of what Eric Donald Hirsch calls "cultural literacy"—that is, the possession of a cursory knowledge of things that any educated adult should know in order to be considered culturally refined.[62] Thus, visual literacy, not unlike biblical, computer, musical, or mathematical "literacies," functions as a way of describing an individual's general understanding of certain subjects, topics, or skills, especially as they relate to a sense of "cultured" refinement.[63]

While it might be useful to talk about ancient Israelites possessing a basic competency in or working familiarity with visual materials, it seems unlikely that "art appreciation" or cultural refinement were the primary lenses through which they utilized or encountered the art of Syria-Palestine. As a result, these more colloquial understandings of "visual literacy" have little heuristic value for the purposes of iconographic exegesis.

More promising are the ways in which visual culture studies has recently developed visual literacy as one of its key theoretical concepts.[64] Rather than seeing visual literacy in terms of one's familiarity with great works of art history, visual culture theorists Roberts Braden and John Hortin (among others) describe visual literary more broadly as "the ability to think, learn, and express oneself in terms of images."[65] By approaching images as a language of communication, this perspective not only underscores how images are able to "encode messages, tell stories, express ideas and emotions, raise

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Studien zur Kognitionswissenschaft; Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitäts-Verlag, 1998), 227–42.

[62] See, for instance, Eric Donald Hirsch, *What Your Second-Grader Needs to Know: Fundamentals of a Good First-Grade Education* (Core Knowledge Series 2; New York: Doubleday, 1991) and Hirsch, Joseph Kett, and James Trefil, eds., *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988).

[63] However, in most cases the depth of knowledge required to appear "culturally literate" is more akin to the type of semi-literacy or function literacy as discussed in §2.2.3.

[64] Visual literacy, along with several related concepts such as visual culture and visuality, have garnered enormous attention by scholars from a wide range of disciplines related to visual culture studies. Several books have appeared with "visual literacy" in their titles, such as James Elkins' edited volume, *Visual Literacy*; and Paul Messaris's *Visual Literacy: Image, Mind, and Reality* (San Francisco: Westview, 1994). Numerous other conferences, symposia, associations, and publications also utilize the language of visual literacy to describe their research interests (cf. Elkins, *Visual Literacy*, 2–3).

[65] Roberts Braden and John Hortin, "Identifying the Theoretical Foundations of Visual Literacy," in *Television and Visual Literacy: Readings from the 13th Annual Conference of the International Visual Literacy Association* (ed. Braden and A. D. Walker; Bloomington: International Visual Literacy Association, 1982), 169.

questions, and 'speak' to [its viewers]," but also how viewers attempt to decode, interpret, and respond to the symbolic meanings, social functions, and political dimensions conveyed by visual materials and practices.[66]

2.3.2. Relevance to the Ancient World

Since the 1990s, the idea of visual literacy has spawned a diverse array of interdisciplinary inquiries into the languages of art, the nature of visual culture, the "techniques of the observer" (to borrow a phrase from Jonathan Crary), and various new perspectives on *Bildwissenschaft*, or "image science."[67] Due to its concern for how images participate in and give shape to the meaningful exchange of knowledge, political ideologies, and religious beliefs, visual literacy offers a helpful conceptual framework for understanding the role and importance of images in cultural theory.

Be that as it may, is the concept of visual literacy relevant to the study of the ancient world? With only a few exceptions, visual culture theorists have, whether implicitly or explicitly, answered this question in the negative. These scholars generally ignore ancient visual artifacts in favor of present-day visual materials, such as photography, advertisements, animation, crafts, fashion, graffiti, tattoos, film, and television.[68] In part, this tendency stems from a methodological commitment within visual culture studies to challenge traditional conventions of art history, including its interest in analyzing Western canons of "high" art in terms of stylistic traditions or aesthetic value. Instead, visual culture theorists have preferred to explore the meaning and function of "low art," contemporary everyday visual objects, or avant-garde art. As a result, very little attention is given either to certain types of art (painting, sculpture, or architecture) or to certain chronological periods (typically anything before the 1950s). Citing Mitchell's pronouncement of a "pictorial turn," many visual culture theorists even contend that visuality (and thus visual literacy) is a unique characteristic of the modern world in contrast to the ancient one.[69]

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[66] Mitchell, *The Language of Images*, 3.

[67] Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990). Mitchell's trilogy of volumes—*Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); and *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005)—have made a substantial contribution to the development of visual cultural studies. For a very brief but helpful overview of four fundamental concepts of image science, see Mitchell's essay, "Visual Literacy or Literary Visualcy?" in *Visual Literacy*, 14–21.

[68] A notable and important exception is John Baines's *Visual and Written Culture in Ancient Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[69] See Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 6.

Nevertheless, Mitchell himself clarifies that the notion of a visual turn refers not merely to the increased use or production of images in our contemporary world. Rather, Mitchell underscores the fact that the turn to images in the intellectual discourse of the humanities and social sciences also signals increased attention to the social functions and effects of visual materials within a given cultural context.[70] In this sense, questions about visuality—by which I mean the objects, practices, social processes, and underlying epistemologies that construct and inform the visual dimensions of culture—might be raised with respect to ancient cultures as much as modern ones.

Therefore, I contend that it would be potentially fruitful to utilize the concept of visual literacy for the purposes of developing a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies. Specifically, the various concepts and implications associated with visual literacy can shed new light on the issues that Keel and Uehlinger's earlier work (*GGG*) left mostly unresolved—that is, the relative importance of images and texts as vehicles of communication *within* the same cultural context or, indeed, on the same artifact. The following analysis proceeds on two levels. First, I show how visual literacy can help clarify how, especially in the case of minor arts (i.e., seals, amulets, ivories, coins, etc.), images functioned as a coherent system of language in their own right (§2.3.3). Second and more specifically, I examine and draw conclusions about the interaction of visual and textual literacies within several representative corpora of visual objects (§2.3.4).

2.3.3. The Languages of (Minor) Art

Scholars interested in iconographic exegesis have long recognized that glyptic materials and other forms of miniature or "minor" art functioned as important vehicles of communication in ancient Israel. Such understandings underlie numerous recent contributions to the field, especially those that attempt to either catalogue or categorize Syro-Palestinian art.[71] However, the most explicit engagement to date of the role and importance of minor art is found in Uehlinger's edited volume, *Images as Media* (2000).

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[70] Mitchell, "Showing Seeing," 171.

[71] The parade example is Keel's *Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette aus Palästina/Israel: Von den Anfängen bis zur Perserzeit* (4 vols. to date; OBO.SA; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995–present [=CSAPI]), which catalogues approximately 8,500 extant Syro-Palestinian seals. See also Jürg Eggler and Othmar Keel, eds., *Corpus der Siegel-Amulette aus Jordanien: Vom Neolithikum bis zur Perserzeit* (OBO.SA 25; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006 [=CSAJ]). More explicitly related to biblical interpretation, LeMon offers a typology of wing iconography in glyptic materials ranging from the Late Bronze Age through the Persian period (*Yahweh's Winged Form*).

In his introductory essay, which was written eight years after the publication of *GGG*, Uehlinger underscores the importance of approaching minor art as *media*. He emphasizes that iconographic data found on minor art functions as a:

> means of communication between producers (ideal and real, i.e. the workshops where the objects originated, but also their official or private patrons and clients), distributors (itinerant craftsmen, traders, official functionaries or others) and recipients in a chain of communication which involved economical, political, and ideological factors alike (including religious belief).[72]

Due both to the abundance of these materials and their compactness of size, Uehlinger suggests that minor art is particularly adept at circulating messages to large communities and across vast territories.[73] The potential for this wide diffusion of iconographic data was likely enhanced in the early first millennium when growing economic integration in and beyond the Levant opened new markets and facilitated trade with new audiences.[74] However, the wide distribution of minor art is not merely the result of the mass media strategies of the "powerful peripheries" surrounding ancient Israel (i.e., Egypt, Phoenicia, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, etc.). Rather, ancient Syria-Palestine had its own incipient "iconographic infrastructure" or visual vocabulary.[75] As a result of these observations, Uehlinger concludes that the iconographic data on minor art "provides a historical source *at least as valuable as texts and literature* for studying local or regional symbol systems, their diffusion, and interaction."[76]

What Uehlinger and the other contributors to this volume powerfully demonstrate—that iconographic data should be deemed as valuable as textual data to contemporary scholars of ancient Israelite religion and the Hebrew Bible—might even be made more explicit if seen from the vantage point of visual literacy. Specifically, while *Images as Media*'s focus is primarily on how images work (i.e., how they function as media), viewing the

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[72] Uehlinger, "Introduction," in *Images as Media*, xv.

[73] Ibid., xv.

[74] See, for instance, Susan and Andrew Sherratt, "The Growth of the Mediterranean Economy in the Early First Millennium BC," *World Archaeology* 24 (1993): 361–78.

[75] Pirhiya Beck, "The Art of Palestine During the Iron Age II: Local Traditions and External Influences," in *Images as Media*, 167.

[76] Uehlinger, "Introduction," xxv (emphasis mine). For further discussion of the "media" aspect of ancient art, see idem, "'Medien' in der Lebenswelt des antiken Palästina?" in *Medien im antiken Palästina: Materielle Kommunikation und Medialität als Thema der Palästinaarchäologie* (ed. Chrisitan Frevel; FAT 2/10; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 31–61; and Frevel and Henner von Hesberg, eds., *Kult und Kommunikation: Medien in Heligtümern der Antike* (Schriften des Lehr- und Forschungszentrums für die Antiken Kulturen des Mittelmeerraumes—Centre for Mediterranean Cultures 4; Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2007).

same research through the lens of visual literacy would underscore *how viewers work with images* (i.e., how they read and interpret images as a kind of language).

Though subtle, shifting attention from "images as media" to "images as language" is not insignificant for developing a visual hermeneutics. From the perspective of visual literacy, it becomes increasingly possible (to borrow—and slightly adapt—a phrase from Nelson Goodman) to think in terms of the "languages of (minor) art."[77] While Uehlinger and the other contributors to *Images as Media* implicitly treat images as a type of language, explicitly describing them as such helps to clarify that both images *and* texts, rather than being inherently dissimilar objects, are actually complementary components of one cognitive symbol system that is produced and consumed for the purposes of conveying information.[78] Without diminishing what are very real differences between images and texts (see ch. 4), the payoff of stressing their similarity as language is to facilitate a more ready comparison between these two types of media, especially with respect to the extent of their use (§2.3.3.1) and the manner in which they signify (§2.3.3.2)

2.3.3.1. Rates and Types of Visual Literacy

Images would have functioned as the "mass media" of the ancient world only to the extent that a vast number of people from diverse segments of Israelite society would have possessed the skills needed to read and understand minor art as a language of communication. Though it is not possible to quantitatively calculate visual literacy rates in the ancient world (nor perhaps even in the modern world), Uehlinger suggests that "in the context of largely illiterate societies, minor arts had a much greater impact and larger diffusion than texts could ever achieve."[79] Framed in the language of this present discussion, visual literacy, unlike textual literacy, would have been a "majority phenomenon" in ancient Israel.[80]

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[77] Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), 9.

[78] However, Uehlinger also recognizes that in addition to being "transmitters of messages," images had other diverse functions ("Introduction," in *Images as Media*, xvi–ii). Though in ways often less obvious to modern observers, texts likewise were utilized for non-communicative purposes, including decoration or magic.

[79] Uehlinger, "Introduction," xxv.

[80] In offering this suggestion, I primarily refer to the ability to read images, not create them. Indeed, we have few examples of visual figurations that might have been produced by non-specialists, except perhaps the Khirbet el-Qom "hand" drawing or some clay figurines. This seems to suggest that the active production of images depended on specialists as much as—or even more than—the active production of texts.

Such conclusions might be said to follow directly from the fact that images far outnumber texts in the archaeological record of Syria-Palestine. Yet as with textual materials (cf. §2.2.1), large quantities of visual materials might well have been produced and utilized by a relatively small portion of society. However, in the case of ancient images, the archaeological record suggests otherwise. Specifically, minor art was not only produced in great numbers, but it was also widely distributed and locally adapted. In her contribution to *Images as Media*, Pirhiya Beck demonstrates that while Israelite and Judahite glyptic art show signs of influence by and interaction with iconographic themes from Egypt, Phoenicia, and Mesopotamia, it also exhibits its own distinct regional styles.[81] Local deities and other figures, including animals, kings, heroes, etc., often appear in an egyptianized guise even as they still possess what Beck describes as a unique "life of their own" in their new cultural context (**figs. 2.1–2**).[82]

The presence of distinct regional styles or "visual dialects" suggests that images were being widely used—and regularly adapted—as a language of communication at a local level. These developments, which are comparable to linguistic phenomenon such as language growth, contact, and change, further justify speaking of the possibility of images being widely read and utilized as a language. In this sense, everyday visual objects, including seals, amulets, and later, coins, become an essential part of the visual culture of the ancient world, conveying messages through artistic motifs that are uniquely shaped and refined in particular contextual environments.

To suggest that images functioned as a widely utilized language of communication in the ancient world is not to imply that all viewers were equally literate. As is the case with textual literacy, varying levels or degrees of visual literacy were likely at play with different viewers or in different contexts. An individual with moderate levels of visual literacy might have been able to read and understand a simple iconographic design on, say, a *lmlk* to read and understand a simple iconographic design on, say, a *lmlk* seal even as he was not be able to fully comprehend all aspects of the Apadana relief or any other complex visual display. Thus, it should be noted that even if visual literacy was more promin-

[81] Beck, "Local Traditions and External Influences," 165–83.

[82] Ibid., 165. Recognizing that foreign elements were integrated and adapted by local workshops is an important consideration when it comes to interpreting the place of origin of glyptic materials. For instance, it was once thought that seals found in Northern Israel with egyptianized tendencies in style and motif were made in Phoenicia, imported, and later inscribed by Hebrew artisans. However, as Beck argues, these seals were more likely produced in local Israelite workshops in a manner that intentionally drew upon the well-known visual vocabulary of ancient Egypt.


Figures 2.1–2. Left: Seal with egyptianized motifs, including two winged sun disks and ostrich feather representing *Maat*; Shechem, Iron Age IIB. After Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 258 fig. 258c; cf. LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 52 fig. 2.22c. Right: Seal with egyptianized motifs, including two winged uraei and a reclining winged sphinx; Megiddo, 8th c. After Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 253 fig. 246.

ent than textual literacy in ancient Israel, some forms of it would best be described as "semi-(visual) literacy" or "functional (visual) literacy."

Though she does not speak in terms of visual literacy, ANE art historian Irene Winter makes a similar point in her discussion of the design of Neo-Assyrian palace wall reliefs.[83] Winter claims that the ability to receive the intended message of a given artistic program depends on the "cognitive competence of the audience: the stored knowledge brought to the situation, ability to understand signs and signals, and skill in decoding."[84] Prior to the reign of Assurnasirpal II (885–856 B.C.E.), palace reliefs primarily featured mythological scenes and cultic symbols, both of which would have required a considerable deal of prior knowledge about cultural ideas and customs in order to discern their meaning.

However, in the ninth and eighth centuries, there was a decided shift in the design of Neo-Assyrian wall reliefs toward historical narratives—that is, visual displays that attempt to depict realistic events (battles, tribute processions, etc.) through a sequential arrangement of action and a careful se-

[83] Irene Winter, "Royal Rhetoric and the Development of Historical Narrative in Neo-Assyrian Reliefs," *Studies in Visual Communication* 7 (1981): 1–38.

[84] Ibid., 29.

lection of specific elements that reinforce the particularity of a historical place and moment.[85] Winter contends that these scenes were more "readable" insofar as they demanded less prior knowledge and competence from the viewer.[86] That is to say, the sequential arrangement of events in these wall reliefs reflects linear human experience and/or the addition of specific visual details (topographical features, characteristic style of dress, etc.) would have made it easier for viewers to identify recognizable places, people, and events without extensive knowledge of (or literacy in) artistic conventions. The shift toward historical narrative scenes in Neo-Assyrian reliefs effectively lowered the "common denominator of decoding" that would have been required for receiving the message conveyed by the art, thus making it possible for more people to understand.[87]

Winter suggests that this trend is understandable when viewed in light of the rapid geopolitical expansion of the Neo-Assyrian empire during the eighth and early-seventh centuries. As the Neo-Assyrian empire came to include a more ethnically and culturally heterogeneous population, a form of visual display was needed that could effectively communicate to prospective audiences that were less versed in the language of Neo-Assyrian art. Since the themes and content of the historical narratives could be understood with less prior cultural knowledge and experience, they were increasingly used in order to foster a common political consciousness among a more diverse array of subjects.

To put the matter in terms of the present discussion, the artistic program of late Neo-Assyrian palace wall reliefs shifted towards more easily readable forms of representation as a way of communicating with viewers who might have possessed a lower level of visual literacy. While Winter does not draw this conclusion explicitly, her research offers further evidence of the fact that those who commissioned ancient images were acutely aware: (1) of the potential of images to function as a vehicle of communication to large and diverse audiences; and (2) of the fact that different audiences had varying degrees of visual competency when it came to understanding the language of art.

2.3.3.2. How Images Signify

The notion that minor art constitutes a type of language raises important questions about how images signify—that is, the way in which they represent the reality to which they refer. A simplistic but often followed view of visual semiotics is that images primarily signify by means of natural re-

[85] Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 1.
[86] Ibid., 29.
[87] Ibid., 31.

semblance. In this view visual representation is thought to be characterized by mimesis. This assumption is at work in biblical scholarship that looks to ancient iconography either as a type of photograph of a historical event or an illustration of a biblical text.

As will be discussed much more extensively in chapter 4 of this study, this view of visual semiotics has been widely challenged by art historians and philosophers alike. Erwin Panofsky, Ernst Hans Gombrich, and Nelson Goodman (among others) argue that visual representation is configured by and activated through historically and culturally variable conventions. As Goodman puts it, "a picture never merely represents x, but rather represents x *as*" or through a mediated form.[88] In fact, Goodman argues that the correspondence between an image and its referent is no less arbitrary (i.e., conventional) than is the correspondence between written language and its referent.[89]

This observation is even true of the previously discussed historical narratives on Neo-Assyrian wall reliefs. While these wall reliefs undoubtedly offer a more readable form of visual display than their predecessors, their apparent realism, to borrow the language of Roland Barthes, "innocents the semantic artifice of connotation."[90] Winter makes this very point. She suggests that the realistic features of these wall reliefs function to naturalize or mask the underlying rhetoric of these scenes.[91] So in the case of the design of Neo-Assyrian wall reliefs, lowering the threshold of visual literacy is a means by which a carefully constructed image of the empire is passed off as a straightforward depiction of how things happened.

That images signify by means of culturally determined conventions does not necessarily imply that there is no difference between how images and texts convey meaning. In fact, Goodman seems to overstate the case about the completely arbitrary relationship between images and their referents. After all, *some* degree of natural resemblance seems to be at work in at least *some* types of art. Portraits and perspectival drawings of buildings or landscape surely rely on conventional codes. Yet, they nevertheless resemble their referents more than, say, a surrealistic painting or, for that matter, a word. These caveats not withstanding, Goodman's and Winter's observations do suggest that reading images, not unlike reading texts, requires a certain level of training, knowledge, and competence—that is, literacy—in

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[88] Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 9.

[89] As will be discussed more in chapter 4, perceptual and conceptual modes of art are probably best thought of as existing on a continuum of mimesis (Zainab Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* [Archaeology, Culture, and Society; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003], 87–89).

[90] Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (trans. Stephen Heath; New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 45.

[91] Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 18.

order to be able to understand the meaning encoded in certain visual symbols and forms.

While it would be going too far to speak of ANE minor art as a Semitic language, talking about images as language in general would reinforce the idea that images, like other forms of language, convey information through mediated conventions of representation. In addition, it would underscore the fact that viewers of images—whether ancient or modern—must be "literate" in the relevant culturally conditioned symbolic conventions in order to understand the message being conveyed. Looking at images more as a language than as an illustration should alert biblical scholars to the need for a more critical assessment of what images do and how images function. Put simply, if images constitute a visual language, then biblical scholars must carefully attend to the study of how that language works.

2.3.4. Visual and Textual Literacies in Interaction

In addition to shedding light on the relative importance of images as a coherent system of language in its own right, the concept of visual literacy also offers a critical lens for evaluating how textual and visual elements interact on the same artifact or within the same corpora of minor art. For the purposes of this study, it will be helpful to briefly examine the interaction of textual and verbal literacies in two particular corpora of glyptic materials: late-sixth-century seals from the Persepolis Fortification Archive and seventh-century Judahite seals.

2.3.4.1. Seals of the Persepolis Fortification Archive

The Persepolis Fortification Archive consists of thousands of administrative tablets found at the Achaemenid imperial capital (*Parša*, or Persepolis) located in the heartland of Persia and dating from 509–494 B.C.E. (during the reign of Darius I).[92] Initial interest in the Persepolis Fortification (PF) archive, carried out by Richard T. Hallock in the late 1960s, focused almost

[92] These tablets were recovered in the 1930s through excavations carried out by the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. See Ernst Herzfeld, "Recent Discoveries at Persepolis," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1934): 226–32. In terms of content, these tablets primarily record numerous types of transactions involving the procurement, storage, and disbursement of food commodities (Mark Garrison and Margaret Cool Root, *Seals on the Persepolis Fortification Tablets, Volume 1: Images of Heroic Encounter* [OIP 117; Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2001], 9).

exclusively on the textual data, much of it in Elamite, which is found inscribed on many of these small, lozenge-shaped tablets.[93]

Despite the focus of Hallock's study, *non*-textual information appears to be the dominant feature of the archive as a whole. In their study of the 1,162 legible seal impressions preserved on the tablets published by Hallock, Mark Garrison and Margaret Cool Root indicate that whereas only half of the recovered tablets are inscribed, the vast majority (86.9%) bear seal impressions.[94] What is more, in light of the seal impressions left on the tablets, it is possible to infer that most of the cylinder seals themselves (91.8%) were anepigraphic, consisting only of iconographic scenes.[95] In this sense, the Persepolis Fortification Seals (PFS) convey messages and meaning through images as much, if not more than, they do through written text. This observation has led Garrison and Root to offer the following conclusion about the nature of the PF archive:

> The archival system itself was not logocentric. It incorporated seal application as a meaningful part of the communication process of record production and ultimate record product. Thus, it is important that scholarship embrace even the sealed but uninscribed tablets as "documents"—whether they were appended originally to bundles or containers of texts or to non-text commodities.[96]

In other words, Garrison and Root's analysis suggests that visuality was the primary mechanism by which the archive recorded and conveyed information.

The archive's preference for images as vehicles of communication is not evident only in the quantity of visual materials discovered. Rather, the archive bears witness to certain visual practices that further indicate that the images, not the texts, were intended as the primary reading materials on these tablets.

A particularly interesting example involves the way in which "mixed-media" seals—that is, seals that contained both an inscription and an image—were applied to the tablets. Examination of the impressions left by these mixed-media seals, many of which bear royal name inscriptions, reveals a peculiar sealing practice. Rather than making a complete rolling of the seal such that its entire surface area came into contact with the tablet,

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[93] Richard T. Hallock, *The Persepolis Fortification Tablets* (OIP 92; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969). Hallock studied a representative sampling of 2,087 tablets, though it is estimated that there are upwards of 30,000 extant clay tablets or tablet fragments.

[94] Specifically, 273 of the 2,087 tablets in Hallock's study (13.1%) are unsealed (Garrison and Root, *Seals on the Persepolis Fortification Tablets*, 1 n. 2). However, the percentage of unsealed tablets might be even lower, since in many of these cases, the surfaces on which seals would typically appear have been severely damaged.

[95] Hallock, *The Persepolis Fortification Tablets*, 7.

[96] Ibid., 3.

officials would often use these cylinder seals somewhat like a stamp seal, pressing only a small portion of the seal's carved surface into the wet clay.

Since multiple surfaces of a tablet were often sealed, including one or more of its narrow edges, it is likely the case that practical considerations, such as limited space on a sealing surface, can account for these partial applications. However, given these practical limitations, the choice of which part of the seal to apply to the tablet—and thus what part of the seal most needed to be read by its viewers—was all the more important. In the vast majority of cases, the application of these mixed-media seals privileged the presentation of the iconographic data. The result is that little to no portion of the inscription is visible in many of the seal impressions.[97]

The royal name seal PFS 0007* (**fig. 2.3**) offers a compelling example of this practice.[98] This seal presents a classic heroic encounter scene in Court Style along with a standard trilingual (Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian) inscription that reads: "I am Darius . . .".[99] Within the archive, PFS 0007* is the most frequently occurring seal of the heroic encounter scene.[100] Due in part to the large size of the seal, few impressions preserve the complete seal design.[101] Of the 115 impressions of this seal found in the archive, 38 (33%) leave no trace of the inscription.[102] A complete rolling of the inscription is evident in a mere 18 impressions (15.7%), and only in a portion of these is the inscription centered in the impression.[103]

In this regard, PFS 0007* is not unique in the archive. Garrison and Root note that the "incorporation of the inscription (in full or in part) was not an essential feature of the sealing protocol even for these very special [royal name] seals."[104] In contrast, 105 impressions (91.3%) include some

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[97] Garrison and Root, *Seals on the Persepolis Fortification Tablets*, 13.

[98] A raised asterisk after the catalogue number of a Persepolis Fortification Seal (i.e., PFS 0007*) indicates that the seal is inscribed. Anepigraphic seals are indicated by a four-digit number without an asterisk.

[99] The inscriptions, enclosed in vertical registers, are read from top to bottom, with Old Persian furthest to the right, Elamite in the middle, and Babylonian closest to the image. There are no known seal impressions that preserve the beginnings and ends of the lines (for a discussion, see ibid., 69). Following Garrison and Root, the transliteration is as follows:

Old Persian [a-]da-ma : da-a-ra-ya-va-[…]
Elamite [v.ú] v.Da-ri-ya-ma-u-iš […]
Babylonian [ana-ku]Da-ri-iá-muš […]

Further commentary and bibliography on the inscription can found in ibid., 68–70.

[100] Ibid., 69.

[101] Ibid., 70. The original height of the seal was 3cm and the length of a full impression of the scene would have been approximately 5cm.

[102] Ibid., 70.

[103] Ibid., 70.

[104] Ibid., 31.

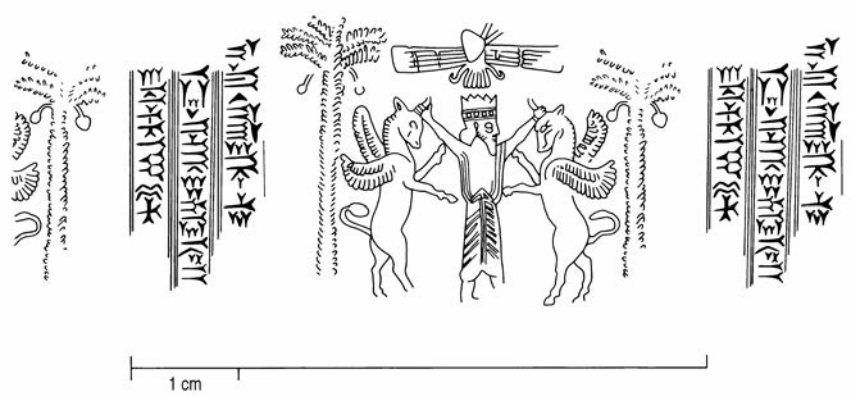

Figure 2.3. PFS 0007* Composite line drawing of a royal name seal from the Persepolis Fortification archive, late 6th / early 5th c. After Garrison and Root, *Seals on the Persepolis Fortification Tablets*, 68.

portion of the image, including 45 impressions with the hero (39.1%) and 77 impressions with one of the two creatures (67.0%). As a result, it appears that the Persepolis Fortification archive, at least in terms of the design and application of the seals, is rather "iconocentric," privileging the presentation of images over texts as a communicative language.

However, it is also important to note that the nature of this sealing practice is not readily evident in the presentation of the research on the PFS. The line drawings of these (and other) mixed-media seals reflect a composite rendering from numerous photographs of actual seal impressions. While these composite line drawings facilitate the analysis of iconographic motifs by presenting the seal impressions in an easily accessible and coherent form, they obscure the fact that the seal impressions themselves would have been rarely seen (or read) in their entirety.

What, then, do these observations suggest about the interaction of visual and textual literacies within this archive? On the one hand, the amount of iconographic data and nature of sealing practices in the PF archive corroborates the notion that visual literacy was an essential component of communication. However, even though the PF archive is not logocentric, texts nevertheless conveyed important information about certain administrative transactions, including the procurement and distribution of food commodities. As Garrison and Root contend, while the archive bears clear evidence of both visual and verbal languages being in use, various aspects of the interaction between the two are poorly understood.[105] For instance: How does the language of the seal inscriptions relate to the iconographic style of the image? How might the iconographic motifs of the seals relate to the administrative purpose of the tablet on which it appears or the socio-economic

[105] Garrison and Root, *Seals on the Persepolis Fortification Tablets*, 8.

status or nationality of the individual who possesses the seal? In what ways were the seal impressions or the cylinder seals themselves used in order to verify the textual data or the identity of the sealer? These and related questions are in need of further thought and investigation.

On the other hand, additional questions emerge with respect to whether the design and use of seals at Persepolis are reflective of broader trends throughout the ANE world, let alone Syria-Palestine. In many ways, the priority placed on visual literacy in the PF archive is not unique. The vast majority of ANE glyptic materials from at least the mid-fourth millennium through the end of the Iron Age are anepigraphic.[106] Likewise, there is evidence that Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian cylinder seals were also used as a type of stamp seal so as to selectively feature certain iconographic motifs in the application of the seal.[107]

Nevertheless, the specific sealing practices on display in the Persepolis archive cannot uncritically be assumed for all corpora of ANE glyptic materials.[108] In fact, in an article on sealing practices from the Mari period, Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati points to some instances in which cylinder seals are applied so as to highlight the inscription portion of the design.[109] Nor, as will be discussed momentarily (cf. §2.3.4.2), do different seal technologies (such as the stamp seals of ancient Israel) allow for the same type of selective privileging of one design component over another. As a result, in

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[106] In his study of Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian cylinder seals, Samuel M. Paley asserts the following: "Inscribed seals and sealings are rare and tablets impressed with inscribed cylinder seals are even more exceptional" (Paley, "Inscribed Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Cylinder Seals and Impressions," in *Insight Through Images: Studies in Honor of Edith Porada* (ed. Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati; Bibliotheca Mesopotamica 21; Malibu, Calif.: Undena, 1986), 209.

[107] Paley, "Cylinder Seals and Impressions," 210. Although it is not certain that these seals were inscribed, the impressions clearly indicate that seals were applied in such a way as to leave only the central figure of the design visible in the impression.

[108] A systematic assessment of the interaction between inscriptions and imagery in sealing practices of different ANE archives has not yet been carried out but would be extremely valuable. There is at least some evidence that the iconocentric practices at Persepolis were not universally followed.

[109] Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati, "Sealing Practices at Terqa," in *Insight Through Images*, 138. Garrison and Root (*Seals on the Persepolis Fortification Tablets*, 13) cite two studies of Ur III seal impressions in which the seal rolling preserved the coherence of the inscription at the expense of the figural imagery. See Giovanni Bergamini, "Neo-Sumerian 'Vignettes'? A Methodological Approach," *Mesopotamia* 26 (1991): 101–18; and Robert M. Whiting, "Sealing Practices on House and Land Sale Documents at Eshnunna in the Isin-Larsa Period," in *Seals and Sealing in the Ancient Near East* (ed. McGuire Gibson and Robert D. Biggs; Bibliotheca Mesopotamica 6; Malibu, Calif.: Undena, 1977), 167–80. Considering the significant time gap between Ur III and Achaemenid Persia, a more thorough diachronic analysis of sealing practices would be required in order to comment more broadly on the interplay of images and texts in ANE seal impressions.

order to account for variations that might obtain in visual materials across time and social and culture locations, a thorough assessment of the interaction of textual and visual literacies ideally proceeds on a case-by-case basis.[110] Nonetheless, since both texts and images were used to convey information (though perhaps to varying degrees) in and through glyptic materials, it is possible to conclude that textual and visual literacies were complementary—not competing—languages of communication. In other words, the PF archive might be said to exhibit a type of "multilingualism" insofar as it utilizes both textual and visual languages as a means of communication.

2.3.4.2. Judahite Seals from the Seventh Century

As alluded to in the previous section, an examination of the interaction between textual and visual literacies in Israelite glyptic materials must account for the fact that ancient Israel, likely under Egyptian influence, almost exclusively used stamp seals in contrast to the more popular cylinder seals of Mesopotamia and Persia.[111] Since the application technique required with a stamp seal—pressing a single, flat surface into wet clay—would have made it quite difficult to privilege iconographic over epigraphic elements (or vice versa) in any given mixed-media seal impression, one must turn to broader trends in the design of Syro-Palestinian seals themselves to better understand the interaction between visual and textual literacies.[112]

Attention to trends in Israelite seal design is not new. In the 1980s, Nahman Avigad demonstrated that iconic seals far outnumbered aniconic ones in ancient Israel up through the eighth century.[113] However, in a later study, Benjamin Sass notes that there is a major shift toward epigraphic designs in Judahite seals in the seventh century.[114] Of the 700 known seals from this period, 370 are exclusively epigraphic while another 130 contain

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[110] Questions pertaining to the nature and dynamics of the text-image relationship will be taken up more extensively in chapter 3.

[111] Generally speaking, by the second half of the eighth century stamp seals replaced cylinder seals throughout Mesopotamia as well. Stamp seals became more prevalent at this time at least in part due to the increased use of papyrus and parchment as a writing surface, especially as Aramaic became a more international language (Paley, "Cylinder Seals and Impressions," 210).

[112] The only way certain elements of a stamp seal can be excluded from an impression is if the seal is applied near the edge of a tablet or wax dripping.

[113] Avigad, *Hebrew Bullae from the Time of Jeremiah: Remnants of a Burnt Archive* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1986).

[114] Sass, "The Pre-Exilic Hebrew Seals: Iconism vs. Aniconism," in *Studies in the Iconography of Northwest Semitic Inscribed Seals*, 194–256.

an inscription with some form of floral register divider or stylized border.[115] Sass, following Joseph Naveh, associates this rise of epigraphic seals with increasing literacy rates in seventh-century Judah.[116] In Sass's view, as more and more people were able to read written materials (a conclusion that might well be challenged in its own right—cf. §2.2), "seal pictures became less necessary from the practical point of view."[117] By assuming that textual literacy and visual literacy relate to one another as inversely proportional phenomena, Sass implies that visual materials only function as a vehicle of communication to those who are textually illiterate. In other words, the implication is that it is only when texts cannot be read that viewers must rely on images.

However, Sass's conclusions are unwarranted for several reasons. For one, it is not necessarily the case that images only function as vehicles of communication to those who are textually illiterate.[118] While this line of reasoning is central to Sass's explanation of trends in Judahite seal design, it is also evident in and through a long history of Christian theology. For example, medieval theologians, ever suspicious of the dangerous power of images, specified that edification of the illiterate was one of the few valid uses of religious imagery in the church.[119] This is why Thomas Aquinas claimed that images are only useful for "the instruction of the unlettered," and why Gregory the Great concluded that "Images are to be employed in churches, so that those who are illiterate might at least read by seeing on the walls what they cannot read in books."[120] In other words, these Chris-

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[115] Sass, "Iconism vs. Aniconism," 197–98.

[116] Ibid., 243. See also Joseph Naveh, *The Early History of the Alphabet* (Leiden: Brill; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982), 71.

[117] Sass, "Iconism vs. Aniconism," 243.

[118] In the conclusion to *Studies in the Iconography of Northwest Semitic Inscribed Seals*, Uehlinger disagrees with Sass on this very point. Yet, he nevertheless suggests that purely iconographic materials, such as imported Egyptian and Phoenician seal amulets, had "taken over, in part or almost completely, the amuletic, i.e. apotropaic and life-promoting functions" (Uehlinger, "Northwest Semitic Inscribed Seals, Iconography, and Syro-Palestinian Religions of Iron Age II: Some Afterthoughts and Conclusions," 286). While amulets might well have functioned apotropaically, it need not mean that they ceased transmitting messages or identifying the individuals that used them. Indeed, it is precisely the iconographical "message" of the image in question that permits, facilitates, or enables its apotropaic use. Thus, Sass's conclusion here belies what Uehlinger so clearly emphasizes elsewhere: images, even apart from texts, can function as vehicles of communication in and of themselves.

[119] David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 4.

[120] As cited in ibid., 162–63 (cf. Aquinas, *Commentarium super libros sententiarum: Commentum in librum III*, dist. 9, art. 2, qu. 2; and Gregory the Great, *Lib. IX, Epistola IX Ad Serenum Episcopum Massiliensem*, PL 77, cols. 1128–29). Note especially how Gregory describes what the illiterate do with images—that is, they "read" them.

tian theologians, not unlike Sass, presumed that pictures are primarily designed for those who could not understand texts.[121]

However, what Aquinas, Gregory, Sass, and others apparently fail to reckon with is the fact that images also function as a meaningful form of communication to those who can (and do) read texts. This point is abundantly clear in the recent emergence of visual culture studies, which emphasizes the role and importance of contemporary visual materials *despite* the fact that textual literacy rates are now higher than at any point in history.[122] Thus, even if textual literacy was widespread in the ancient world, it would not follow that the visual arts were any less important when it came to expressing and transmitting information for the vast majority of individuals—indeed, everyone with sight. As a result, the rise of Judahite inscribed seals in the seventh century does not necessary imply that images were falling out of use or that visual literacy was any less important as a vehicle of communication.

In a response essay that appears in the same volume as Sass's research, Uehlinger offers an alternative explanation of these trends in Judahite seal production. Uehlinger notes that during this same time there was a massive influx of Egyptian and Phoenician faïence and glass anepigraphic amulets in Syria-Palestine.[123] Uehlinger suggests that the influx of these anepigraphic amulets might have led to or reflected an emergent distinction between seal and amulet functions. Specifically, the amulets might have taken over the "apotropaic and life-promoting functions" of earlier inscribed seals.[124]

This functional distinction between image and inscription might also be on display in a small number of bifacial seals, such as in **fig. 2.4**, in which one side is purely iconographic and the other is (almost) purely epigraphic.[125]The presence of bifacial seals and the proliferation of amulet imports during the seventh century indicate that while the majority of seals

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[121] Implicit in this assessment is the notion that the skills required to successfully read an image are inherently more basic, or even more natural, than those required to read texts. Such notions about visual literacy and picture-processing skills are on display in Messaris's *Visual Literacy*.

[122] According to a 2009 UNESCO report, approximately 83.7% of the global population is literate (UNESCO Institute for Statistics Fact Sheet, September 2011, No. 16).

[123] Uehlinger, "Some Afterthoughts," 284–86.

[124] Ibid., 286.

[125] For a more detailed discussion of this seal, see Sibylle Mähner, "Ein Namen- und Bildsiegel aus ʿĒn Šems (Beth Schemesch)," *ZDPV* 108 (1992): 68–81. However, it is important to note that other layouts of bifacial seals are evident, such as text-text and image-image designs. Thus, bifacial seals might simply reflect the desire of seal cutters to utilize more of the available surface area for engraving (cf. Uehlinger, "Some Afterthoughts," 286 n. 91).

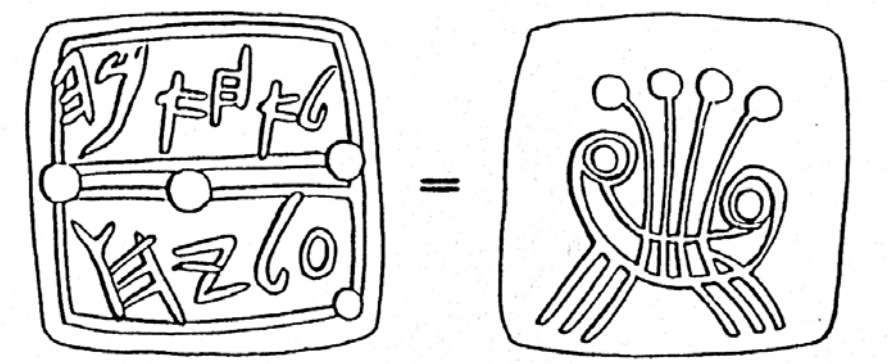

Figure 2.4. Bifacial seal impression in limestone, Beth Shemesh, 7th c B.C.E. The seal belongs to *'ḥ'mh (bn) 'lyhw*. After Uehlinger, "Northwest Semitic Inscribed Seals," 286 fig. 23; cf. Mähner, "Ein Namen- und Bildsiegel aus 'Ēn Šems," Abb. 1f.

produced in Judah were aniconic, the full repertoire of minor art circulating in Judah at this time was still significantly characterized by iconographic data. As a result, rather than suggesting that images were falling out of use during this period, it appears that textual and visual literacies were functioning side-by-side, even on the same objects (as is the case on the bifacial seals) or within the same corpora of artifacts (as is the case with iconic amulet imports and aniconic domestic seals).

These considerations aside, there still remains the issue of *why* seals produced in Judah during the seventh century were increasingly aniconic. As early as the 1950s, Adolf Reifenberg connected this rise in aniconic seals to the emergence of a theologically motivated ban on images, perhaps instituted by Josiah.[126] However, Sass challenges this straightforward connection between the glyptic evidence and deuteronomic reforms and instead suggests that these trends are evidence of growing aniconic ideological tendencies present throughout the ancient Near Eastern world.[127] While Uehlinger also contends that biblical texts and glyptic aniconic trends should not too readily be seen as reflecting the same underlying causes, he acknowledges that non-religious factors cannot be considered the sole reason for the decrease in Judahite iconic seals.[128] Uehlinger tentatively proposes that these trends in aniconic seal design might correspond, at least to

[126] Adolf Reifenberg, *Ancient Hebrew Seals* (London: East and West Library, 1950), 17.

[127] Sass, "Iconism vs. Aniconism," 245. A more recent treatment of ANE aniconic tendencies and their potential relationship to the image-ban in ancient Israel can be found in Tallay Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol: Pictorial Representation of Deities in Mesopotamia and the Biblical Image Ban* (OBO 213; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005).

[128] Uehlinger, "Some Afterthoughts," 287.

a certain degree, with the emergence of the deuteronomistic "name theology" which specified that Yahweh's presence in the temple was mediated by his name alone.[129] Uehlinger suspects that "this new fervor for God's name might have been influenced by the growing insistence of Judaean seal-cutters and their customers on what could aptly be termed 'name-alone' seals."[130]

However, even if the production of aniconic seals was partially, or even fully, motivated by iconoclastic theologies, it need not imply that images ceased functioning as vehicles of communication more broadly. While the second commandment of the Decalogue seems to place strictures on making images of the deity, it remains clear, at least from an archaeological perspective, that (to borrow a phrase from Silvia Schroer) "*in Israel gab es Bilder*."[131] In fact, art historian David Freedberg claims that it is a myth that certain cultures, even monotheistic ones, were purely aniconic, or in other words, relied solely on textual literacy to express and transmit religious (or other) knowledge.[132] Freedberg contends, "Abstinence from figuring the deity does occasionally occur, but for the rest the notion of aniconism is wholly untenable."[133] Put simply, even if aniconism is taken to be a valuation of the degree of spirituality or purity of monotheistic religious (a problematic assumption in its own right), supposedly aniconic cultures like ancient Israel nevertheless relied on and utilized images as a language of communication, and even more specifically, *religious* communication. "Aniconism," then—at least as that term is understood to apply globally—simply does not fit as a description for ancient Israelite religion (see ch. 6 for further discussion).

2.3.5. Conclusions on Visual Literacy

In light of these findings, it is increasingly clear that iconographic materials, especially in the form of minor art, functioned as a widely utilized language of communication in ancient Israel. If images were as commonly used and read as Uehlinger and others have argued, then long-held views about the hegemony of texts and textual literacy in biblical scholarship must be challenged. By "visualizing" literacy in the ancient world, the above analysis not only furthers the theoretical basis of those scholars who

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[129] Uehlinger, "Some Afterthoughts," 288.

[130] Ibid., 288.

[131] Silvia Schroer, *In Israel gab es Bilder: Nachrichten von darstellender Kunst im Alten Testament* (OBO 74; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987).

[132] See especially Freedberg's chapter "The Myth of Aniconism," in *The Power of Images*, 54–81.

[133] Ibid., 54.

have called into question text-alone approaches to the study of the Bible but it also clarifies the relative importance of texts and images within a given cultural context or even on individual artifacts. Two central conclusions emerge from this observation.

First, the notion that ancient Israel was a text-based culture that primarily communicated through aniconic media must be regarded as a myth that is far more motivated by logocentric perspectives in western philosophy and Judeo-Christian theology than it is by an understanding of either the archaeological record of Syria-Palestine or the operative symbol system of this ancient culture.[134]

Second, while both textual and visual literacies would have been operative in ancient Israel, visual literacy was more likely to have been a "majority phenomenon" than textual literacy. However, it should be noted that it is rather difficult to access with any precision what portion of the population would have been visually literate. Coming up with such a number is not my intention. Rather, I simply mean to underscore the fact that there is ample evidence to suggest that the levels of visual literacy in ancient Israel were higher than that of textual literacy. In this sense, I use the term "majority phenomenon" not as a valuation of a specific rate of visual literacy (i.e., > 50% of the population) but rather to contrast the prominence of visual literacy with Goody's previously mentioned notion that textual literacy was a "minority phenomenon" in all pre-nineteenth century societies. Images seem to have been the *primus inter inaequales* of ancient Israelite communicative media. Put simply, visual literacy mattered more, and to more people, than textual literacy as a means of transmitting and negotiating religious belief and other forms of cultural knowledge.

2.4. Whither Images in Biblical Studies?

These reflections on the theory of visual literacy do more than just provide studies in iconographic exegesis with a familiar and convenient linguistic trope for talking about the process of "reading" images as a type of media. Rather, by shedding light on the importance of iconographic data as a language of communication, the concept of visual literacy brings into clearer focus how and why images mattered in ancient Israel. Conversely, "visualizing" literacy in the manner forwarded in this chapter also bears practical implications for how and why images should matter for contemporary biblical scholarship. If images, especially in the form of the minor arts, functioned as something of a *lingua franca* in ancient Israel as it did throughout most of the ANE world, then biblical scholars must revise and reformulate

[134] The development of much of this ideology or theology took place without the benefit of access to the archaeological record.

the sorts of questions they ask and issues they raise about how—not *if*—biblical texts should be studied in light of ancient iconography.

By way of conclusion, this section sketches the most basic tenets of a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies that emerge from the above analysis. Three facets of this visual hermeneutics are of note.

First, to reiterate and reinforce a point already made by Keel and Uehlinger in the opening pages of *GGG*, it is imperative that biblical scholars *utilize images as a primary source for the study of ancient religion.* This sort of "altar call" to the study of images is needed in light of the fact that, as already indicated at the outset of this chapter, visual data has so often been ignored by biblical scholars in favor of textual materials. A parade example of these logocentric tendencies is evident in past biblical research on ancient Near Eastern seals. Despite the fact that iconographic data is the most prominent feature of the total corpus of ANE stamp and cylinder seals, the study of this material has long been dominated by epigraphic and paleographic concerns. This is especially evident in both Nahman Avigad's research on west Semitic stamp seals and Jeffrey H. Tigay's important work on Hebrew onomastica.[135] In these and other studies, images are either mostly ignored or treated as little more than decorative features. As such, whatever religio-historical conclusions are made derive almost exclusively from textual data.

Yet, as has been made clear in the present chapter, the iconography of minor art functions as a form of mass media that was widely read and utilized as a coherent vehicle of communication.[136] To put the matter most

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[135] Avigad, *Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals* (ed. and rev. by Benjamin Sass; Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, The Israel Exploration Society, and the Institute of Archaeology, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1997); and Jeffrey H. Tigay, *You shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions* (HSS 31; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986). One might also note similar trends in the work of Larry G. Herr, *The Scripts of Ancient Northwest Semitic Seals* (HSM 18; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1978) and F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp et al., eds., *Hebrew Inscriptions: Texts from the Biblical Period of the Monarchy with Concordance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

[136] One of the earliest examples of this methodological shift in biblical research on seals is Kurt Galling's 1941 (!) investigation of iconographic motifs and styles in ANE glyptic materials ("Beschriftete Bildsiegel des ersten Jahrtausends v. Chr. vornehmlich aus Syrien und Palästian: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der phönizischen Kunst," *ZDPV* 64 [1941]: 121–202). While Galling's work was truly ahead of its time, it did not have a lasting influence on the field. More recently, numerous detailed iconographic studies have surfaced. With respect to west Semitic stamp seals, the following volumes have made especially important contributions: Keel and Schroer, *Studien zu den Stempelsiegeln aus Palästinas/Israel* (4 vols.; Freiburg; Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985–1994); Sass and Uehlinger's *Studies in the Iconography of Northwest Semitic Inscribed Seals*; and Eggler and Keel, eds., *CSAJ*. Perhaps most significantly, the five-volume *CSAPI*, when complete, will offer a comprehensive analysis of the approximately 8,500 extant Syro-Palestinian seals.

simply, the methods and practices of contemporary biblical scholarship should more fully account for the fact that images, perhaps far more than texts, played a central role in expressing and transmitting ideas and information, whether religious or otherwise. More explicitly, forwarding the study of images in the text-based discipline of biblical studies would not only further the visual turn already at work in the humanities and social sciences but it would also enrich and expand various areas of research related to the study of Israelite religion or even early Judaism and Christianity.

Second and closely related, the fact that images functioned as a coherent language of communication in the ancient world has important implications for how contemporary scholars analyze iconographic data. Namely, *ANE images need not always be interpreted in light of textual data and instead can and should be studied in their own right and on their own terms*. A similar point has already been made by Keel, Uehlinger, and a number of other scholars interested in iconographic exegesis.[137] These scholars recognize that while cultural context and historical background are vital to understanding an image, such knowledge does not always (or only) come from written documents.

Writing in the mid-1990s, Irene Winter, an art historian who specializes in ANE art, offers a similar assessment:

> What has been amply demonstrated over the past 25 years, and especially in the past ten, is, on the one hand, that one simply cannot look at the verbal domains of information and not include the visual in the larger universe of cultural communication; and, on the other hand, that one cannot restrict study of the visual to merely establishing chronology and articulating formal properties. Rather, the visual domain contains within it primary information, as well as unique structures of knowledge— oftentimes in parallel or complementary with, occasionally even quite distinct from, the textual record. Consequently, the visual needs to be studied with the full analytical arsenal available to us—art historical, archaeological, anthropological, and textual—and *on its own terms.*[138]

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[137] See especially Keel, *Das Recht der Bilder gesehen zu werden: Drei Fallstudien zur Methode der Interpretation altorientalischer Bilder* (OBO 122; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992); and Uehlinger, "Clio in a World of Pictures – Another Look at the Lachish Reliefs from Sennacherib's Southwest Palace at Nineveh," in *Like a Bird in a Cage: The Invasion of Sennacherib in 701 BCE* (ed. Lester L. Grabbe; JSOTSup 363; ESHM 4; London: Sheffield Academic, 2003), 221–305.

[138] Winter, "Art *in* Empire: The Royal Image and the Visual Dimensions of Assyrian Ideology," in *Assyria 1995: Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Helsinki, September 7–11, 1995* (ed. Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997), 359; emphasis hers.

What Winter makes clear is that it is no longer tenable for scholars to think of ancient iconography as "nice pictures" that merely illustrate what are otherwise text-alone approaches. Neither would a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies endorse a type of "cut-and-paste" methodology in which small fragments of iconographic data are extracted out of a larger visual context only to be juxtaposed next to a biblical phrase or verse reference as "proof" of a given interpretation.[139] Rather, images are to be thoroughly analyzed according to the stylistic principles and symbolic conventions of their own particular artistic and cultural contexts. Visual materials are, in short, to be treated with no less rigor and no less attention to their communicative intentions than textual materials.

While Keel and Winter are both undoubtedly correct when they stress that images should be studied on their own terms, this need not imply that images should always be studied *apart from texts.* Curiously, after the publication of Keel's *Das Recht* in 1992, many contributions to the Fribourg School began to shift away from iconographic exegesis (i.e., interpreting biblical texts in light of ANE art) toward the cataloguing and publication of primary iconographic materials. These latter contributions are of enormous value and have significantly advanced our access to and understanding of the meaning and significance of ANE images in their original contexts. Even still, this work seems to be motivated by a different set of questions and concerns than is found in more exegetically oriented studies. It is for this reason that LeMon draws distinctions between varying approaches to the study of ancient art.[140] Whereas interpreting ANE images for their own sake might constitute a distinct approach in LeMon's typology (i.e., the iconographic-artistic approach or the iconographic-historical approach), interpreting ANE images on their own terms can represent a stage *within* an iconographic-biblical approach. Although LeMon does not specifically make this point, his own work in *Yahweh's Winged Form* offers an insightful example of how images might be studied on their own terms within a project ultimately and explicitly geared toward biblical exegesis. In a similar way, a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies would underscore the need to study images as a coherent, culturally-conditioned language of

[139] Such procedures are evident in what is often considered the earliest work of the Fribourg School—Keel's *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997 [1978]). In this otherwise insightful volume, isolated fragments of ANE images are provided with little analysis except for the biblical quotes or references placed beneath them. The different methodological approaches between *Symbolism* and *Das Recht* are indicative of the development of the Fribourg School over time.

[140] LeMon offers a typology of three approaches to the study of ancient iconography: (1) the iconographic-artistic approach; (2) the iconographic-historical approach; and (3) the iconographic-biblical approach (*Yahweh's Winged Form*, 7–16). See also idem, "Iconographic Approaches," 146–51.

communication in their own right without necessarily foregoing interest in how those images come to bear on an interpretation of various aspects of biblical literature, including metaphors and other forms of figurative language.

Third and finally, by emphasizing the importance of images as a language of communication in the ancient world, a visual hermeneutics would position biblical scholars *to study images as one of the most relevant sources for interpreting the meaning and significance of figurative language and other imagery in the Bible*. As noted at the outset of this study, scholars have traditionally read and interpreted biblical literature in light of other written documents from the ancient world. However, since textual literacy rates were quite low, it seems more likely the case that imagery conveyed by minor art would have informed how the vast majority of ancient viewers came to understand the meaning and significance of their sacred texts. In a broader sense, images provide a window into the thought world or cognitive processes that lie behind the biblical text and its figurative language. As a result, ancient images can shed light on the conceptual world that informs and guides how scholars understand biblical literature.[141]

Furthermore, while those interested in iconographic exegesis widely acknowledge that ancient art provides a critical source of data for interpreting biblical literature, their methodological procedures have not always sufficiently challenged traditional assumptions about the importance of textual materials and textual literacy in ancient Israel. For instance, in his commentary on the Song of Songs, Keel lays out a procedure for reading biblical texts in light of ANE images.[142] In Keel's "concentric circles" approach, which is now widely followed in iconographic exegesis, one seeks to interpret ambiguous literary imagery in the Bible by consulting other comparative data.[143] Specifically, one begins with the immediate literary context of the biblical text and then proceeds to broader literary settings, including a wider range of biblical materials as well as literary texts from other ANE cultural settings. Finally, and only after exhausting the textual data, does Keel suggest engaging non-textual sources, including iconography.[144]

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[141] That ancient iconography can be understood to "illuminate" the conceptual world behind the Bible will be discussed further in chapter 3.

[142] Keel, *The Song of Songs* (trans. Frederick J. Gaiser; CC; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

[143] See, for instance, LeMon, "Iconographic Approaches," 150–51. However, in many other contributions, Keel himself does not strictly follow the concentric circles approach.

[144] Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 27. However, for Keel and others who follow the concentric circles methods, it is rarely the case that an analysis of textual data is fully exhausted before turning to images.

Even though Keel's concentric circles method provides a helpful way of organizing and presenting the results of iconographic exegesis, it does not fully account for the relative importance of images and texts within Israelite culture. That is, Keel's methodology still presumes that textual data would have functioned for most ancient Israelites as the most relevant and accessible source of background knowledge for understanding the Hebrew Bible. Though I do not mean to suggest that familiarity with texts and written traditions was irrelevant, it seems highly unlikely that the vast majority of ancient Israelites, many of whom were illiterate, would have turned to visual materials only *after* their knowledge of textual sources was exhausted. Or, to put the matter in a slightly different way, the average Israelite would have turned to visual materials quite quickly since their knowledge of texts would have been easily exhausted!

In brief, Keel's concentric circle methodology, while insightful and influential, does not go far enough in terms of "visualizing" the sorts of literacies that would have informed the conceptual background of the ancient world. If visual literacy was a majority phenomenon in ancient Israel and if the images on minor art functioned as a widespread language of communication throughout the Levant—a point which seems irrefutable—then it follows that the comparative study of ancient art should be one of the innermost "concentric circles" of biblical interpretation, not the last consulted when all else fails. Practically speaking, this need not mean that images should always be consulted first or that they must always be considered the most important piece of comparative data in every interpretive project. Yet these observations should push biblical scholars to offer more critical reflection on the ways in which ancient visual culture might have informed and shaped how Israelites came to see and understand their written texts.

However one chooses to prioritize textual and iconographic data within Keel's schema, his circles of data remain concentric—that is, they not only share the same center, but they also share contiguous borders. In other words, images and texts are juxtaposed in relationship to one another, both in the ancient world as well as in contemporary biblical scholarship. Questions pertaining to the nature of this juxtaposition (which is to say, the image-text relationship) are essential to the development of a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies and are the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 3
Drawing Distinctions:
The Image-Text Relationship

"The dialectic of word and image seems to be a constant in the fabric of signs that a culture weaves around itself. What varies is the precise nature of the weave, the relation of warp and woof."[1]

"Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter: therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone."[2]

3.1. Relating (ANE) Images and (Biblical) Texts

Whether in contemporary art or ancient artifacts, images and texts relate to and interact with one another as complementary languages of communication.[3] In fact, the impulse to couple visual depiction with verbal description—to show *and* tell—is, as the epigraph from W. J. T. Mitchell above claims, "a constant in the fabric of signs that a culture weaves around itself."[4] The sorts of interactions that occur between visual and verbal data are no less important within iconographic exegesis. In its most basic definition, iconographic exegesis seeks to analyze the nature of the relationship between specific ancient images and corresponding biblical texts.[5] Even as

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[1] W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986), 43.

[2] John Keats, "Ode to a Grecian Urn," in *Keats's Poetry and Prose* (ed. Jeffrey N. Cox; Norton Critical Editions; New York: Norton, 2008), 460–62.

[3] Chapter 2 of this study addressed the relationship between images and texts in its broadest terms, arguing that a type of visual-verbal "multilingualism" existed in the ancient Near Eastern world not only between discrete forms of media (e.g., iconic seals and inscribed tablets) but also on the same mixed-media artifacts (e.g., epigraphic seals with iconographic elements).

[4] Mitchell, *Iconology*, 43.

[5] For instance, Joel M. LeMon explains that the "iconographic-biblical approach" is an interpretive method that attempts to answer the question, "How can [ANE] images inform readings of particular biblical texts?" (*Yahweh's Winged Form in the Psalms: Exploring*

biblical iconographers employ a variety of methods and pursue a range of topics, the shared starting point for their research is the belief that images and texts *do* relate and that ancient visual materials have something valuable to say about the meaning and significance of literary imagery in the Bible. As a result, iconographic exegesis can be understood as an interpretive method that attempts to listen in on this conversation between image and text, to hear (as Keats's epigraph intimates) the melodies of mute images and to give voice to the inaudible insights of ancient art in service of enhancing and enriching biblical interpretation.

Yet, what is the nature of this conversation and how have the interactions between images and texts been conceptualized within past work in iconographic exegesis? Prior to the rise of the Fribourg School in the 1970s, the nature of the relationship between ancient art and the Bible was rarely scrutinized in any detail. Scholars and casual observers alike tended to presume that ancient art depicted in visual form something similar to what the Bible (or other texts) described in written language. As but one example, this sort of perspective is on display in early efforts to relate the Persian period Behistun relief (**fig. 3.1**) to biblical literature.[6]

This relief is carved into a shear rock face some 500 feet above the plain, just off the main caravan route that connected Ectbatana to Babylon. The relief was likely commissioned in the early years of Darius I's reign over Achaemenid Persia (around 522–520 B.C.E.). It includes a 10-by-18 foot sculptured panel along with various inscriptions in Elamite, Babylonian, and Old Persian. Broadly construed, both image and text represent Darius I's rise to power over ten subjugated rivals to the throne (albeit in slightly different ways; see §3.4). When the nineteenth-century English noblemen Sir Robert Ker Porter first saw the relief, he readily concluded that this late-sixth century B.C.E. image illustrated the deportation of the ten northern tribes of Israel by the Neo-Assyrian King Shalmaneser as told in 2

Congruent Iconography and Texts [OBO 242; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010], 9). Likewise, Izaak J. de Hulster defines "iconographic exegesis" as "the explanation of [biblical] texts with the help of [ANE] pictorial material" (*Iconographic Exegesis and Third Isaiah* [FAT 2/36; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck], 18). Although they use different terminology, LeMon's "iconographic-biblical approach" and de Hulster's "iconographic exegesis" both refer to an interpretive method that uses ancient visual artifacts to gain added insight into the background, meaning, and significance of biblical texts. In this volume, I follow de Hulster's terminology and typically refer to this method as iconographic exegesis. Nevertheless, following LeMon I find it help to use the term "biblical iconographers" as a shorthand way of referring to scholars who employ the method and practices of iconographic exegesis.

[6] The name of this relief, which is derived from the small village of Bisitun (or Bisutun) at the base of the mountain, was Anglicized as "Behistun" in the early-nineteenth century.

Figure 3.1. The Behistun relief, near the modern-day city of Kermanshah in western Iran, late 6th c. B.C.E. After Strawn, "A World Under Control," 114 fig. 15; cf. Porada, *The Art of Ancient Iran*, 147 fig. 77.

Kgs 17:3–6.[7] Likewise, the nineteenth-century French explorer, Paul Ange Louis de Gardane, also interpreted the content of the Behistun relief in light of biblical literature—indeed, he believed that the scene depicted Jesus' twelve disciples![8]

Admittedly, neither Porter's nor Gardane's interpretation was driven by historical-critical concerns. Their views were likely more influenced by local knowledge and folk traditions than art-historical insights. My point here is not to criticize these explorers for misapprehending the intended subject matter of the Behistun iconography. Nor is it to suggest that viewing art in light of knowledge of biblical themes is inappropriate. Nevertheless, I believe that their interpretations reflect a broader tendency to understand ancient art primarily as a type of illustration of texts, whether biblical or otherwise.

More recent contributions to iconographic exegesis have called into question the sorts of implicit understandings of the image-text relationship that are on display in examples like these. For instance, Othmar Keel, in his oft-cited entry on "Iconography and the Bible" in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, contends that "the relationship between biblical texts and pictures contemporaneous to them remains neglected, in that it has never been studied in a systematically thought-out way, as is normal in the other disci-

[7] Robert Ker Porter, *Travels in Georgia, Persia, Armenia, Ancient Babylonia, etc.* (2 vols.; London: Longman, 1821), 2:149–63. Porter conjectured that the pointed hat of the figure on the far right was an "exaggerated representation of the mitre worn by the sacerdotal tribe of Levi" (163).

[8] Paul Ange Louis de Gardane, *Journal d'un Voyage dans la Turquie d'Asie et la Perse, Fait en 1807 et 1808* (Paris: Le Nourmant, 1809), 83.

plines of biblical research."[9] Brent A. Strawn offers a similar assessment when he notes that an understanding of "the iconographic-biblical type of text-art correlation is still in its infancy in biblical studies."[10] In response to these concerns, a growing number of "second-wave" biblical iconographers (cf. §1.1) have begun to give more attention to the complexity and importance of the image-text relationship. By raising new questions and revising methodological procedures, these scholars are attempting to refine how the field of iconographic exegesis talks about and describes the relationship between visual and verbal data.

Yet, despite the significant advances won through this work, understandings of the image-text relationship are still in need of further development, especially as they pertain to two related lines of inquiry.

First, within iconographic exegesis past discussions about the image-text relationship have generally been carried out in an *ad hoc* fashion and have mainly addressed isolated exegetical questions. As a result, the biblical scholarship that deals with the image-text relationship evinces a diversity of concerns and positions, many of which remain methodologically diffuse and/or conceptually disconnected from one another.

In response, my goal is not to settle or resolve once for all how images and texts relate to one another with a single, comprehensive theory. Even visual culture theorist W. J. T. Mitchell, a scholar who has perhaps contributed more to the advancement of image-text theory than any other in the past several decades, does not aim to offer an all-embracing theory about the image-text relationship. Instead, he attempts "to historicize [the image-text relationship], to see how the struggle reflects historical and intellectual settings" and "to see what interests and powers it serves."[11] Following Mitchell's lead, I attempt in this chapter to historicize the image-text relationship in past contributions to iconographic exegesis by identifying, categorizing, and evaluating the various ways in which scholars have talked about and described the relationship between ancient iconography and the Bible.

Second, much of the previous attention paid to the image-text relationship in iconographic exegesis has addressed practical issues related to interpretive procedure—that is, how does one find, research, and incorporate ancient images when studying the Bible?[12] However important these con-

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[9] Othmar Keel, "Iconography and the Bible," *ABD* 3:358.

[10] Brent Strawn, "Imagery," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings* (ed. Tremper Longman and Peter Enns; Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008), 311.

[11] Mitchell, *Iconology*, 44.

[12] For instance, de Hulster's *Iconographic Exegesis* addresses several practical issues related to the image-text relationship, including how one researches images (§§3.6–7) and how one incorporates them into biblical interpretation (§3.8). Likewise, Strawn's treatment of the image-text relationship is heavily focused on the question of image analysis, as is

siderations are, Izaak de Hulster is right to note that questions associated with the image-text relationship are not just a matter of method but also of theory.[13]

While biblical iconographers have rarely turned to visual theory to inform their work (cf. §1.1), the image-text relationship is one of the most widely discussed topics within the ever-growing body of literature from visual culture studies and certain forms of art history and literary criticism. As a result, a second way of advancing the discussion about the image-text relationship would involve integrating important theories about the image-text relationship into the methods and practices of iconographic exegesis. This line of inquiry would help biblical scholars better conceptualize the image-text relationship and more clearly discern, as Mitchell puts it, "the precise nature of [its] weave, the relation of warp and woof."[14]

My purpose in this chapter, then, is to address these two lines of inquiry, both of which might be broadly construed as ways of *drawing distinctions* about the image-text relationship. On the one hand, I attempt to characterize or draw distinctions *between* how the image-text relationship has been talked about and described within past approaches to iconographic exegesis (§3.2). Specifically, I identify three main issues—image-text *congruence*, *correlation*, and *contiguity*—that have directed the study of the image-text relationship in iconographic exegesis, giving careful attention to how methodological perspectives have developed over time. On the other hand, I also describe approaches to the image-text relationship in visual theory with a view toward how this research might help biblical scholars and ancient art historians better conceptualize or draw distinctions *about* the interaction between images and texts in ancient visual culture.

Toward this end, I will outline and evaluate two theories that are central to Mitchell's innovative work on the image-text relationship (§3.3)—namely, the "image-text dialectic" and the "metapicture"—and apply them to certain features of the previously mentioned Behistun relief (§3.4). In the final section I reflect on how insights from Mitchell's visual theory might further advance the ways in which biblical scholars approach the relationship between ancient art and the Bible, especially with respect to issues concerning image-text congruence, correlation, and contiguity (§3.5).

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especially evident in his review of Panofsky's three-step iconographic method ("Imagery," 309–11).

[13] De Hulster, *Iconographic Exegesis*, 31.

[14] Mitchell, *Iconology*, 43.

3.2. The Image-Text Relationship in Iconographic Exegesis

In an important essay, Joel LeMon has delineated three related subfields of iconographic studies, each motivated by a different set of underlying questions.[15] Within his typology, only the "iconographic-biblical approach" is expressly concerned with the relationship between ancient art and biblical texts.[16] However, within the iconographic-biblical approach itself, the image-text relationship has been talked about and described in a variety of different ways. Each approach addresses a different aspect of what it means for an image and text to be "related," and as such, each approach seeks to answer a different set of questions about the interaction between visual and verbal data.

These approaches have yet to be studied in a systematic manner, and in many cases, the methodological perspectives on display in this research remain disconnected from one another.[17] As a result, it is possible to further characterize iconographic exegesis by delineating three main issues or perspectives that have directed past discussions about the image-text relationship:

(1) image-text *congruence*: Which images and texts can be thought of as being related and to what extent do they share similar themes, motifs, or subject matter?

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[15] According to LeMon, the three subfields of iconographic study, along with their orienting questions, are as follows: (1) The iconographic-artistic approach: How does one discern the meaning(s)/significance of an ancient Near Eastern image? (2) The iconographic-historical approach: How does one reconstruct ancient Near Eastern history and religion with the help of images? and (3) The iconographic-biblical approach: How can ANE images inform readings of particular biblical texts? For further discussion, see LeMon, "Iconographic Approaches: The Iconic Structure of Psalm 17," *in Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen* (ed. Joel M. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards; SBLRBS 56; Boston: Brill, 2010), 146–51; and idem, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 9–16.

[16] It should be noted that LeMon's "iconographic-historical" approach is interested in the image-text relationship as it pertains to how ANE monumental reliefs relate to captions, inscriptions, and historical annals.

[17] One possible exception is Keel's previously mentioned entry on "Iconography and the Bible" in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Keel offers critical insight into how past scholars have tried to study the Hebrew Bible in light of ANE art. As helpful as this historical survey is, Keel offers little explicit reflection on the nature of the image-text relationship. He only briefly enumerates three ways in which a biblical text might relate to a work of art: (1) a text can explicitly describe a work of art; (2) a text can implicitly draw on or elude to pictorial representations; and (3) a text and image can independently represent the same concept, motif, or subject matter (3:358). However, in my view Keel's analysis primarily deals with only one of the three issues addressed below (i.e., image-text correlation).

(2) image-text *correlation*: At what level are images and texts related and how have scholars understood both the type and direction of interaction that occurs between these two media?

(3) image-text *contiguity*: To what extent does the presence of historical lines of influence and/or mechanisms of contact determine whether a given image and text are considered related and what are the implications for comparative methodologies?

While I treat image-text congruence, correlation, and contiguity as discrete issues, they are in fact conceptually related with one another, even if these connections are not always evident in past contributions to iconographic exegesis. The inter-relationship between these three concepts is set out in summary form in **fig. 3.2**. In what follows, I explore past approaches to these three issues with the goal of not only elucidating how biblical iconographers have construed the nature of the image-text relationship but also highlighting how underlying methodological perspectives have developed over time.

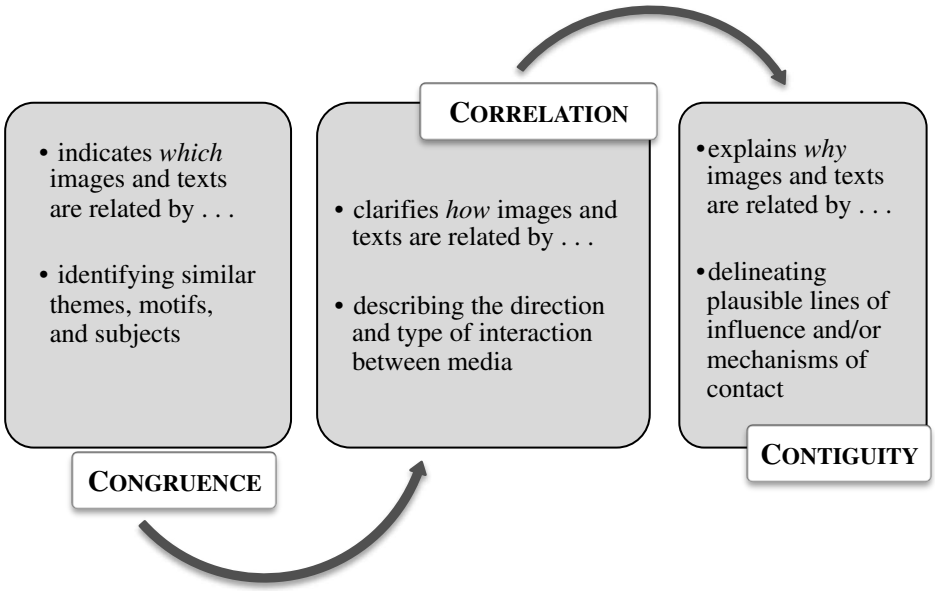

Figure 3.2. The inter-relationship between image-text *congruence*, *correlation*, and *contiguity*.

3.2.1. Approaches to Image-Text Congruence

Within iconographic exegesis, perhaps the most common way of construing the image-text relationship is in terms of similarity or *congruence*.[18] In this view, to say that a given image and text are related is to assert that they share similar themes, motifs, or subject matter. In fact, the presence of some degree of congruence is often taken as warrant for comparing specific visual and verbal data in the first place.[19] Yet, as is the case in other comparative methods, similarity is a matter of degree and adjudicating whether an image and a text (or any other two objects) are congruent is subject to interpretation, and occasionally, considerable debate. As a result, within past research in iconographic exegesis scholars have disagreed not only about which images and texts are related, but also about how similar related materials are to one another.

Throughout the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, biblical scholars were especially eager to identify points of similarity between newly unearthed visual artifacts and the Hebrew Bible. Working with a rather low threshold for what constitutes congruence, these scholars tended to compare images and texts on the basis of very general similarities. For the most part, their studies left the precise nature of the congruence implicit, if not all together ambiguous. This approach is especially evident in the catalogues of ANE art produced in the first half of the twentieth century, such as Hugo Gressmann's *Altorientalische Texte und Bilder zum Alten Testament* (1909) and James B. Pritchard's *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament* (1954).[20] While these volumes succeed in making a large corpus of ancient art available to biblical scholars, they do little to explain how certain images and texts are similar or why such congruence might aid biblical interpretation. Furthermore, Gressmann and Pritchard work almost exclusively with isolated fragments of both images and texts.[21] By selectively comparing only small portions of what are larger

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[18] LeMon's utilizes this terminology through his study, *Yahweh's Winged Form in the Psalms.* See especially the summary table in this concluding chapter, which compares literary representations of Yahweh in the Psalter with "congruent iconographic motifs in Syro-Palestinian art" (190).

[19] However, while some degree of similarity may be a necessary condition for comparative analysis, it is not always a sufficient condition. For further discussion, see §3.2.3 below.

[20] Hugo Gressmann, *Altorientalische Texte und Bilder zum Alten Testament* (2d ed.; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1927 [1909]) = *ABAT2*; James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament* (2d ed. with suppl.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969 [1954]) = *ANEP*.

[21] This way of relating ancient art and the Bible is often referred to as "fragmentation" (LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 14; cf. Keel, "Iconography and the Bible," *ABD* 3:367–69). Fragmentation is already evident in the nineteenth century, as is the case with John Wilkinson's work on Egyptian art and Austen Henry Layard's work on Assyrian art. See,

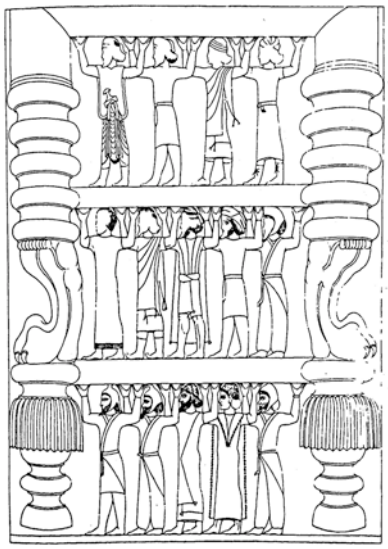

Figure 3.3. Relief from the south door of the Hundred Column Hall at Persepolis, late 6th c. B.C.E. After Strawn, "A World Under Control," 97 fig. 8; cf. Keel, *Symbolism*, 351 fig. 476a.

artistic and literary compositions, these scholars often seem to stack the comparative deck so as to give the impression that certain images and texts are more closely related than their larger contexts might allow. Thus, in the earliest stages of iconographic exegesis, image-text congruence was presumed as much as it was established, and as a result, little effort was made to evaluate the precise nature of the similarity or the broader context in which the comparison took place.

This rather facile approach to image-text congruence was widely challenged during the early stages of the Fribourg School. In fact, Keel critiques Pritchard on this very point when he argues in the introduction to his *The Symbolism of the Biblical World* that "a noticeable shortcoming of *ANEP*, however, is its failure to fully live up to the second part of its title"—that is, how ANE pictures relate to the Old Testament.[22] Maybe so. But Keel's own work in *Symbolism* rarely offers a more rigorous discussion of issues concerning image-text congruence. For example, in his discussion of music and song in the Psalter and ANE art, Keel uses the words of Ps 22:3 ("Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel") as a type of

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for instance, Wilkinson, *The Manners and Customs of Ancient Egyptians* (3 vols.; London: John Murray, 1837); and Layard, *Nineveh and its Remains* (2 vols.; London: John Murray, 1849).

[22] Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (repr. ed. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997 [1978]), 11.

label or caption for a line drawing of a Persepolis wall relief that depicts the throne of the king being lifted up by 14 individuals, who, according to their distinctive dress and head coverings, represent the diverse peoples of the empire (**fig. 3.3**). Regarding the congruence of image and text, Keel concludes, "Just as the Persian king is enthroned on the loyalty of his subjects, so Yahweh is enthroned on the recognition and praise of Israel."[23] Thus, in Keel's estimation, Ps 22:3 and this Achaemenid relief are related insofar as they seem to reflect similar themes or concepts—that is, the enthronement of the king/deity upon the willing support of his subject people.

While Keel is right to apprehend a level of similarity between Ps 22:3 and this "king on high" motif in Achaemenid art, he offers a rather sparse treatment of the artistic and literary contexts at hand, and he does not analyze the image (or, for that matter, the text) in any detail. Not only does Keel fail to specify *why* he chose this particular relief in comparison to other Achaemenid monuments that display a similar scene but he also neglects the important matter of how Achaemenid versions of this motif differ from earlier Egyptian and Mesopotamian prototypes.[24] As a result, in her extensive treatment of the king on high motif in Achaemenid iconography, ANE art historian Margaret Cool Root cautions that even though Keel makes a potentially fruitful connection between this motif and the Hebrew Bible, his comparison is carried out "without perhaps ever realizing the full symbolic value of the Achaemenid representations."[25] In this way, Keel's treatment of image-text congruence suffers from a lack of contextualization and precision, much like *ANEP* and *ABAT2*. Yet, perhaps unlike Pritchard and Gressmann, Keel is not unaware of these methodological shortcomings.[26] At the outset of *Symbolism*, Keel readily admits that he is not primarily concerned with clarifying the finer points of the relationships between

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[23] Keel, *Symbolism*, 351 (see the caption that accompanies fig. 476a).

[24] Representations of the "king on high" motif are evident in other monumental art from Achaemenid Persia including: the statue of Darius from Susa, the tomb facades at Naqsh-i Rustam, and the east doorjambs of the Central Building of Darius at Persepolis. In addition, earlier prototypes of the king on high motif are present throughout Egyptian and Mesopotamian iconography. However, in most of these instances imperial hierarchy is portrayed as an adversarial relationship between the king and his subject people. For a discussion of both issues, see Margaret Cool Root, *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art: Essays on the Creation of an Iconography of Empire* (Acta Iranica 19; Textes et mémoires 9; Leiden: Brill, 1979), 131–61.

[25] Root, *King and Kingship*, 161.

[26] Specifically, Keel acknowledges that the survey-like style of *Symbolism* is designed to make "easily accessible . . . the broadest possible range of pictorial materials, and of indicating, in the text, similarities between the problems and conceptions presented by the pictures and those presented by the psalms" (*Symbolism*, 12). Keel's qualified remarks are often overlooked in otherwise insightful critiques of his methodology. See, for instance, LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 15.

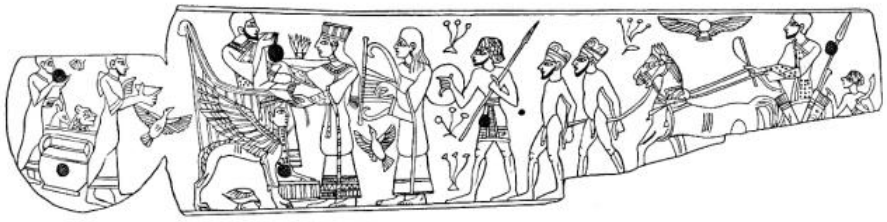

Figure 3.4. Ivory plaque, Megiddo, Late Bronze Age. After LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 6 fig. 1.2; cf. Loud, *The Megiddo Ivories*, pl. 4, 2a, and 2b.

certain images and texts. Rather, he intends "to exhibit identical, similar, or even diametrically opposed apprehensions of the same phenomenon."[27] That is to say, Keel is interested in image-text congruence in its broadest and most general terms.

Nevertheless, being able to identify the level of congruence between a given text and image—if they are identical, similar, or diametrically opposed—is not always self-evident, and occasionally presents a significant exegetical challenge. For instance, in his comparative research on the literary imagery of Yahweh's winged form in the Psalter, LeMon notes how this language, which is found in six psalms, might draw upon several different background concepts, including: (1) representations of the deity as a winged sun god; (2) the winged cherubim as a metonym for the ark or Jerusalem temple; or (3) common avian imagery as a source domain for the metaphor YAHWEH IS A BIRD.[28] In this particular case, ANE art seems to raise as many questions as it answers about the meaning of the biblical imagery since there are visual artifacts that depict each one of these possible referents. In fact, the well-known Megiddo ivory (**fig. 3.4**) depicts a winged sun disk, a winged cherub adorning a throne, and several birds—all on the same object.[29] As a result, it is initially unclear which, if any, of these images might be said to be congruent with Yahweh's winged form in the Psalter.

In response to this exegetical problem, LeMon offers a more thorough assessment of image-text congruence. Specifically, he analyzes how the arrangement of literary imagery, or "iconic structure," in each of these six psalms compares with specific sets, or constellations, of related iconographic motifs. Through a careful consideration of the literary and artistic contexts, LeMon attempts to establish "distinct patterns of congruency be-

[27] Keel, *Symbolism,* 12–13. It should be noted that Keel's approach in *Symbolism* was phenomenological and not, strictly speaking, historical-critical.

[28] LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 1–5. Not unlike LeMon, de Hulster is also interested in the issue of image-text congruence. He, too, raises the question of which images should be selected given a certain biblical text (*Iconographic Exegesis*, 30).

[29] LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 6–7.

tween the literary portrayals of Yahweh with wings and the iconography of Syria-Palestine."30 What LeMon finds is that while the primary point of congruence is with visual imagery of the winged sun disk, each of the six psalms analyzed exhibits a certain degree of "multistability" insofar as it relates to several similar but distinct iconographic motifs.31 Thus, by establishing points of congruence between a larger network of images and texts, LeMon not only avoids the type of fragmentation common in previous work but is also better able to account for which visual artifacts are congruent with the description of Yahweh's winged form(s) in the book of Psalms.

LeMon's research represents a significant methodological advance in how biblical iconographers approach the issue of image-text congruence. Rather than juxtaposing isolated or fragmented images and texts on the basis of very general, and at times superficial, points of similarity, LeMon demonstrates the need to establish patterns of congruence between ever-larger constellations of literary imagery and iconographic motifs.[32] Further, since LeMon provides a more detailed analysis of both the artistic and literary contexts at hand, he is better equipped to explain the extent of the congruence that obtains between certain ANE images and the Hebrew Bible. In this way, LeMon's work is representative of a growing trend in iconographic exegesis to give more attention to questions concerning which images and texts should be thought of as being related and how closely this relationship should be scrutinized.

3.2.2. Approaches to Image-Text Correlation

Second and closely related, iconographic exegesis has also frequently construed the image-text relationship in terms of questions surrounding *correlation*—that is, at what level are images and texts related? In its most basic form, the question of image-text correlation seeks to clarify the presence of image-text congruence. Put differently, image-text correlation explores what sort of interaction or level of dependence must exist between visual and verbal media in order to account for the fact that certain ancient images seem to represent in pictorial form themes or motifs that are also evident in the Bible. That biblical iconographers have approached this question in dif-

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[30] LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 189.

[31] Ibid., 192–93.

[32] Specifically, LeMon notes the following: "The next potential advancement of the iconographic-biblical approach is for scholars to bring ever-larger constellations of literary imagery into conversation with congruent constellations of iconographic motifs" (ibid., 16). In many ways, LeMon's research models this non-fragmentary approach to image-text congruence. However, it is possible to take his approach one step further by focusing on a larger literary unit as opposed to discrete psalms.

ferent ways is due in large part to the fact that scholars often operate with conflicting assumptions about both the type and direction of interaction that is evident between certain images and texts.

Before the emergence of the Fribourg School, scholars tended to presume that a thematic similarity between an ancient image and biblical text resulted from a specific type of interaction between these two forms of media: namely, one of the two representations was directly dependent on, or genetically derived from, the other. In this view, either ancient art is thought of as illustrating the biblical text much like a drawing in a "picture Bible," or the Bible is understood as describing ancient visual artifacts in the manner of ekphrastic poetry. Although something akin to ekphrasis might be evident in Ezek 23:14–15, which appears to offer a brief description of a Chaldean wall relief, most early biblical iconographers assumed that the direction of interaction worked in the reverse—that is, images illustrated texts.[33]

A well-documented example of this approach comes from the late-nineteenth century when British Assyriologist George Smith proposed that a Mesopotamian cylinder seal (**fig. 3.5**) depicted the story of the Fall in Gen 3:1–24.[34] Smith, who believed that the seal represented "two figures sitting one on each side of a tree, holding out their hands to the fruit, while at the back of one is stretched a serpent," readily presumed that the iconography was directly related to the biblical text.[35] Several biblical scholars, including Friedrich Delitzsch and Jason Nelson Fradenburgh, followed Smith's lead in concluding that this biblical story—or some form of it—was known by the Mesopotamian seal maker.[36] Fradenburgh is unequivocal on the matter, concluding that the seal "*illustrates* the story of Genesis, and admits of no other satisfactory explanation."[37]

Although this "illustration" approach to image-text correlation is not uncommon, it is problematic on at least two levels. For one, in assuming that the apparent similarity between these two objects is the result of direct

[33] This approach is also evident in Porter and Gardane's view of the Behistun relief (§3.1).

[34] Both LeMon ("Iconographic Approaches," 143–45) and Keel ("Iconography and the Bible," 3:369–70) critique Smith's reading of this seal as an example of the need for further methodological development in iconographic exegesis.

[35] George Smith, *The Chaldean Account of Genesis* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1876), 90–91.

[36] Friedrich Delitzsch, *Babel and Bible: Two Lectures on the Significance of Research in Religion, Embodying the Most Important Criticisms and the Author's Replies* (trans. Thomas J. McCormack and W. H. Carruth; Chicago: Open Court, 1903), 48; and Jason Nelson Fradenburgh, *Witnesses from the Dust*, or *The Bible: Illustrated from the Monuments* (Cincinnati: Cranston & Stowe, 1886), 50–51.

[37] Ibid., 51; emphasis mine.

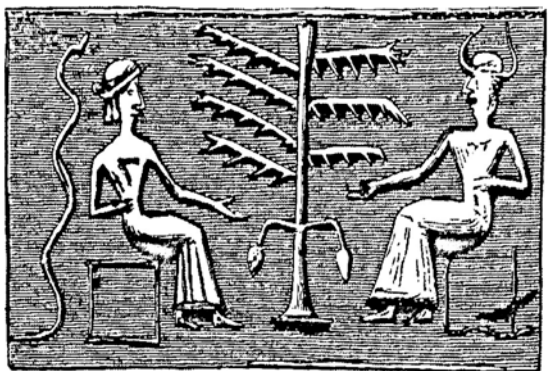

Figure 3.5. Cylinder seal with banquet scene, Mesopotamia, 2192–2004 B.C.E. After LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 144 fig. 1; cf. Smith, *The Chaldean Account of Genesis*, 91.

dependence, this approach might be said to suffer from a type of "parallelomania."[38] Samuel Sandmel introduced this term—and many others have used it since—to critique comparative studies that overestimate the degree of dependence that exists between different phenomena.[39] In the case of the "Adam and Eve" seal, Smith, Delitzsch, and Fradenburgh were so eager to establish a parallel between the seal and Genesis 3 that they made little effort to understand the content and meaning of the image in its proper art-historical context.

In contrast, Dominique Collon offers a more judicious assessment when she notes that this seal actually depicts a traditional Mesopotamian banquet scene in which a worshiper (on the left) and a god (on the right) are seated facing a date palm tree.[40] From this vantage point, the seal appears to share little in common with the scene described in Genesis 3, and thus the image can hardly be understood to illustrate the text. Thus, Smith, Delitzsch, and Fradenburgh misconstrue the question of image-text *correlation* at least in

[38] Samuel Sandmel, "Parallelomania," *JBL* 81 (1962): 1–13.

[39] Mark W. Chavalas rightly notes that "parallelomania" often increases sharply after important archaeological discoveries, as is evident in the pan-Babylonian movement in the second half of the nineteenth century and the pan-Ugaritic movement in the second half of the twentieth century. See Chavalas, "Assyriology and Biblical Studies: A Century and a Half of Tension," in *Mesopotamia and the Bible: Comparative Explorations* (ed. Mark W. Chavalas and K. Lawson Younger Jr.; JSOTSup 341; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 43–45.

[40] Dominique Collon, *First Impressions: Cylinder Seals in the Ancient Near East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 36. In their edited volume, Jeremy Black and Anthony Green note that the snake is likely a symbol of regeneration or fertility (*Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary* [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992], 166–67).

part because they fail to adequately analyze issues pertaining to image-text *congruence*. That is to say, because these scholars do not accurately analyze the themes and content of the image itself, they are unable to properly apprehend the the degree of similarity that might exist between these two media.

Second, the impulse to discover a text lurking behind every image also misconstrues the direction of interaction between ancient art and the Bible. For instance, the previously mentioned Mesopotamian banquet seal predates the book of Genesis by well over a millennium, thus making it all but impossible to talk about how the image is derived from or even directly relates to this biblical text.[41] Furthermore, *even if* a seal maker had access to a biblical text and wished to depict one of its scenes, it is far from certain that he would have attempted to do so by means of a literalistic illustration.[42] In fact, as Keel and others rightly note, ANE iconography is more conceptual than it is perceptual, and therefore it rarely aims to provide "historical photographs" of past events or naturalistic illustrations of written texts, whether biblical or otherwise.[43] As a result, this view of image-text correlation seems to rest on the mistaken notion that visual materials, whether ancient or modern, copy or reproduce the objects they signify in a

[41] However, this does not preclude the possibility that a non-biblical text would have influenced the production of the seal.

[42] In his survey of past contributions to iconographic exegesis, Keel connects the tendency to understand ANE visual artifacts as illustrations of the Hebrew Bible with the long tradition of literal exegesis present in both Jewish and Christian biblical interpretation ("Iconography and the Bible," 3:359–64). Interestingly, biblical scholars are not the only ones connecting image and text in this manner. Art historian Julian E. Reade contends that written documents and sculptures in Neo-Assyria are "like print and picture in an illustrated book" ("Ideology and Propaganda in Assyrian Art," in *Power and Propaganda: A Symposium on Ancient Empires* [ed. Mogens Trolle Larsen; Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1979], 329).

[43] Keel, "Iconography and the Bible," *ABD* 3:360. To press this matter further, one should note the ways in which contemporary theorists have even questioned the nature of visual representation in photographs. Traditionally, the photograph has been thought of as the literalistic illustration *par excellence* in that it functions as "a message without a code." However, this view is now rejected by at least some scholars. For instance, Roland Barthes's book, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (trans. Richard Howard; London: Vintage, 1993 [1981]), consistently challenges, as Mitchell puts it, "the textual strategies that tend to incorporate photographs as 'illustrative' or evidentiary examples" (Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 302). Instead, Barthes underscores the ways in which photographs resist the language of texts, and come to speak on their own terms. Thus, even when a photograph is incorporated into a story in a newspaper or magazine, one can speak of the correlation between image and text as "illustration" only in a highly qualified way.

direct and unmediated fashion.[44] Or, to put the matter differently, perhaps this view of image-text correlation rests upon a mistaken notion of what an illustration is in the first place. After all, there are various different ways of illustrating something, many of which do not rely on sameness, verisimilitude, or mimeticism. In fact, a good deal of illustrations attempt to clarify or demonstrate an idea through analogies, evocative examples, or object lessons. If biblical iconographers were to understand the idea of illustration in this manner, it perhaps would still serve as a useful way of talking about the relationship between some images and texts in the ancient world. However, like Fradenburgh, many biblical scholars have not thusly qualified their use of the term illustration, and as a result, they have tended to conceptualize the idea of image-text correlation in a rather simplistic fashion.

Thus, while neither illustration nor ekphrasis are implausible ways of accounting for the presence of image-text congruence in general, they are not typically the best ways of explaining the relationship between ancient iconography and the Bible.[45] In fact, recent biblical iconographers have come to explain the similarity of certain images and texts as the result of a more indirect relationship. Rather than seeing image and text as genetically derived from one another, many scholars in and beyond the Fribourg School now understand images and texts to be mutually dependent on an underlying mental concept.[46] Strawn advocates this sort of perspective in

[44] The "mimesis" view of visual representation has been widely critiqued by literary critics and visual culture theorists in the last several decades. This and other issues related to the nature of visual representation are discussed in more detail in chapter 4 of this study.

[45] However, there are some exceptions. For instance, the sixth century C.E. *Topographia Christiana* provides a blueprint-like rendition of the Tent of Meeting based on a literal reading of Exodus 25–31 (Wanda Wolska-Conus, *La topographie chrétienne de Cosmas Indicopleustes* [Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1962]). Likewise, one of the first printed Bible commentaries, written in the sixteenth century by the Franciscan monk Nicholas of Lyra, included thirty technical drawings based on literal readings of biblical texts. Conversely, as indicated above, some biblical texts might well be understood as a type of ekphrastic poetry (i.e., Ezek 23:14–15). Nevertheless, as is discussed further below, illustration and ekphrasis do not exhaust the types of relationships that obtain between the Hebrew Bible and most ANE visual artifacts.

[46] This type of perspective seems to be present, though in a less-developed form, in several contributions to iconographic exegesis that predate Keel's *Symbolism*. For instance, Hermann Gunkel, Alfred Jeremias, and Hugo Gressmann all look to ANE art as a potential resource for understanding the conceptual background of the Hebrew Bible. See, for instance, Gunkel, *Ausgewählte Psalmen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1904); Jeremias, *The Old Testament in the Light of the Ancient East: Manual of Biblical Archaeology* (trans. from the 2d German ed. by C.L. Beaumont; ed. C.H.W. Johns; New York: Putnam, 1911 [1904]); and Gressmann, *ABAT2*.

his study of the correlation between the Apadana reliefs and Isaiah 60.[47] While he does not preclude the possibility that the biblical authors had direct contact with Persian art, Strawn contends that "the notion of direct dependence is not the best way to discuss the relationship between Isaiah 60 and the Apadana."[48] Instead, Strawn suggests that images and texts can function as dual "reflexes" of the same underlying message.[49] As a result, whether reflecting religious beliefs or political ideologies, these underlying mental concepts (what Jan Assmann calls an "icon") can be mutually expressed through either visual or verbal media.[50]

A similar view of image-text correlation is also evident outside of iconographic. In her comparison of Neo-Assyrian wall reliefs with historical annals and standard inscriptions, Irene Winter argues that written materials should be understood as existing *alongside*, not behind, visual artifacts.[51] In Winter's view, Neo-Assyrian images and texts comprise two independent, though parallel, vehicles of communication that together function as "powerful and reinforcing statements, linguistic and visual, that both carry the same message."[52] Winter's conclusions are suggestive of the ways in which biblical iconographers have come to see the correlation between ancient iconography and the Bible—that is, less in terms of a picture book or an ekphrastic poem, and more as two books, one of pictures and the other of text, both of which relate to a similar concept.[53]

This perspective significantly reorients the ways in which image-text correlation is talked about and described within iconographic exegesis. Specifically, rather than suggesting that ancient images *illustrate* biblical

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[47] Strawn, "'A World Under Control': Isaiah 60 and the Apadana Reliefs from Persepolis," in *Approaching Yehud: New Approaches to the Study of the Persian Period* (ed. Jon L. Berquist; Semeia St 50; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), esp. 111–14.

[48] Strawn, *A World Under Conrol*, 114. Questions concerning mechanisms of contact between image and text is further explored under the heading "image-text contiguity" in §3.2.3 below.

[49] Ibid., 114.

[50] Jan Assmann, *Egyptian Solar Religion in the New Kingdom: Re, Amum and the Crisis of Polytheism* (Studies in Egyptology; trans. Anthony Alcock; London: Kegan Paul International, 1995), 38. For a helpful discussion of Assmann's work on Egyptian New Kingdom solar hymns, see LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 18–20.

[51] Irene Winter, "Royal Rhetoric and the Development of Historical Narrative in Neo-Assyrian Reliefs," *Studies in Visual Communication* 7 (1981): 2.

[52] Ibid., 21. While I generally agree with Winter's claim, it is perhaps more judicious to say that images and texts carry "similar" messages rather than the "same" message. As I discuss in more detail in chapter 4, visual and verbal signs operate according to different semiotic principles, thus making it difficult to say that they communicate the same exact thing or in the same exact way.

[53] Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 18. That images and texts have the *capacity* to relate similar concepts does not necessarily imply that they always do so. The issue of which images and texts are related (i.e., congruence) is a somewhat different matter (cf. §3.2.1).

texts, most biblical iconographers look to ancient iconography as a resource that *illuminates* the background of the Bible by helping contemporary readers, as Keel puts it, "to see [the Hebrew Bible] through the eyes of the ancient Near East."[54] Said differently, images provide "a way to share in the mental map of a culture," including the cognitive processes that inform the production of figurative language.[55]

As an example, biblical iconographers have been increasingly interested in utilizing ANE art to clarify the meaning of biblical metaphors. Drawing upon metaphor theory from Paul Ricoeur, Max Black, Mark Johnson, George Lakoff, Mark Turner, and others, numerous scholars have argued that adequately understanding the full significance of a metaphor, including its system of associated implications, is contingent on understanding the original user's sign-context.[56] Specifically, ancient iconography can help contemporary readers visualize the conceptual source domains that give rise to figurative language, especially when it comes to ambiguous, idiosyncratic, or "dead" metaphors. For instance, Martin Klingbeil explores how figurative language about God as a Divine Warrior in the Psalter might draw on "cognitive imagery" that is also evident in ANE iconography.[57] What Klingbeil and others indicate is that since image and text are correlat-

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[54] Keel, *Symbolism*, 8. This perspective reverses the interpretive gaze of previous biblical scholars who often saw ancient art through the eyes of the Bible.

[55] De Hulster, *Iconographic Exegesis*, 21.

[56] The scholarly literature on metaphor theory has expanded rapidly in the past several decades, and is now being appropriated by a variety of academic disciplines including biblical studies. While theories from Max Black (*Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1962]) and Paul Ricoeur (*The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977]) are still cited by some biblical iconographers, most attention has shifted to conceptual or cognitive metaphor theory, which was initiated by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's influential volume, *Metaphors We Live By* (rev. ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003 [1980]). Since then, publications that explore the intersection between metaphor theory and cognitive studies has grown exponentially. See, for instance, Mark Turner, *Death is the Mother of Beauty: Mind, Metaphor, Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Raymond W. Gibbs, *The Poetics of Mind: Figurative Thought, Language, and Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), and Zoltán Kövecses, *Language, Mind, and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[57] Martin Klingbeil, *Yahweh Fighting From Heaven: God as Warrior and as God of Heaven in the Hebrew Psalter and Ancient Near Eastern Iconography* (OBO 169; Fribourg: University Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 158. Likewise, in his analysis of leonine imagery in both ANE art and the Hebrew Bible, Strawn demonstrates that the various instantiations of the literary metaphor GOD IS A LION (i.e., "the LORD roars from Zion," Amos 1:2), should be understood in light of how the lion was a trope of power and threat in the ancient Near Eastern world. See Strawn, *What is Stronger Than a Lion.*

ed at the conceptual level, ancient art can provide a window into the world (or the mind) behind a metaphor.

These approaches to the image-text relationship reflect a new way of understanding both the type and direction of correlation that occurs between ancient iconography and the Bible. Since most biblical iconographers are now inclined to think of images and texts as being mutually dependent on a common concept, there is a greater tendency to read visual data without recourse (at least initially) to written texts.[58] Likewise, by focusing predominantly on how the figurative language in the Bible draws on or reflects concepts that are also evident in ancient art, there is now an increasing concern for how ancient visual culture might have come to influence the production and reception of the figurative language of biblical texts.

3.2.3. Approaches to Image-Text Contiguity

The third major issue that has surfaced in iconographic exegesis has to do with the question of image-text contiguity. To put the matter in terms of the previous discussions, if image-text *congruence* identifies the existence of common motifs, themes, and subjects between images and texts and if image-text *correlation* seeks to explain the level and degree of interaction between images and texts that scholars relate to one another, then image-text *contiguity* seeks to historicize the interactions between visual and verbal data through discernable lines of influence and/or plausible mechanisms of contact. This issue touches upon a broader question about the nature of comparative methods—namely, must two objects of study come from the same (or similar) geographical, chronological, or even social contexts in order to be considered related?[59] Past research in iconographic exegesis has answered this question in different ways, and as a result, it is possible to identify both contiguous and non-contiguous approaches to the comparison of ancient art and the Bible.

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[58] In iconographic exegesis, this methodological practice is perhaps first clearly articulated in Keel's *Das Recht der Bilder gesehen zu werden: Drei Fallstudien zur Methode der Interpretation altorientalischer Bilder* (OBO 122; Freiberg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992). De Hulster claims that this shift toward dealing with ANE iconography in its own right is characteristic of the third stage of development (ca. 1986–1992) of the Fribourg School ("Illuminating Images: An Iconographic Method of Old Testament Exegesis with Three Case Studies from Third Isaiah" [Ph.D. diss., Utrecht University, 2008], 73–85).

[59] Strawn provides a lucid survey of recent debates about comparative method within biblical studies in his essay, "Comparative Approaches: History, Theory, and the Image of God," in *Method Matters*, 117–42.

The vast majority of recent research in iconographic has attempted to establish a historical-critical basis for comparing ancient art and the Bible. Most biblical scholars have implicitly followed William W. Hallo's "contextual approach" to comparative studies.[60] This approach mainly pursues intra-cultural comparisons that are delimited by what Shemaryahu Talmon calls "geographical proximity" and "historical propinquity."[61] When biblical scholars pursue this sort of comparative study, they not only attempt to identify thematic similarities between certain images and texts but they also seek to explain how specific visual artifacts might have been accessible to or known by the original authors and readers of the Bible.

This latter question can be addressed in one of two ways. Many biblical scholars choose to work primarily with visual and textual materials that are historically contiguous with one another. This strategy is especially evident in Keel and Uehlinger's *GGG*, which offers a diachronic study of Syro-Palestinian art from the Middle Bronze Age through the Persian period. Since Keel and Uehlinger utilize images to study the history of religious imagination, it is essential that they work with visual materials that might well have been seen (and used) by the original authors and readers of the Hebrew Bible. Yet, interest in historical contiguity does not necessary preclude the possibility of working with visual materials found outside of Syria-Palestine or from time periods that predate biblical literature. In fact, recent research by Uehlinger and others has underscored the fact that the minor arts enabled the diffusion and preservation of iconographic data across vast territories and time periods.[62] As a result, the minor arts functioned as a type of "mobile media" insofar as they provided a means of inter-cultural contact.

Concerns with "contiguity" and "contact" play an important role in Strawn's iconographic study of the motif of Yahweh's outstretched arm (נטויה זרוע) in the Hebrew Bible.[63] Through a careful analysis of both

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[60] William W. Hallo, "Compare and Contrast: The Contextual Approach to Biblical Literature," in *The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context III* (ed. William W. Hall, Bruce William Jones, and Gerald L. Mattingly; ANETS 8; Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1990), 1–30; and idem, "Biblical History in Its Near Eastern Setting: The Contextual Approach," in *Scripture in Context* (ed. Carl D. Evans, William W. Hallo, and John B. White; PTMS 34; Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1980), 1–26.

[61] Shemaryahu Talmon, "The 'Comparative Method' in Biblical Interpretation: Principles and Problems," in *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn; New York: New York University Press, 1991 [1978]), 386.

[62] For a discussion of the role of minor arts as media, see §2.3.2 above.

[63] Strawn, "Yahweh's Outstretched Arm Revisited Iconographically," in *Iconography and Biblical Studies: Proceedings of the Iconography Sessions at the Joint EABS/SBL Conference, 22–26 July 2007, Vienna, Austria* (ed. Izaak J. de Hulster and Rüdiger Schmitt; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2009), 163–211.

Figure 3.6. Limestone relief of Akhenaten, Nefertiti, and daughter, Amarna, 14th c. B.C.E. After Strawn, "Yahweh's Outstretched Arm," 202 fig. 7; cf. Keel, *Symbolism*, 210 fig. 288.

iconographic and textual data, Strawn establishes that biblical language concerning Yahweh's outstretched arm shares many points of similarity with Amarna Age iconography that depicts the life-giving rays of Aten outstretched toward worshipers (often Akhenaten or one of his family members) and delivering the *ankh* as an expression of life or blessing (**fig. 3.6**).[64]

However in Strawn's view, image-text congruence only tells part of the comparative story. In order to make a case for contiguity, Strawn explores how the iconography of the relatively short-lived Aten cult from fourteenth-century Egypt might have come to influence biblical language about Yahweh's outstretched arm, most of which appears to be Deuteronomic or Deuteronomistic in origin.[65] Although there is a considerable gap in time between the Amarna period and even the earliest date for this biblical material, it is widely noted that Amarna theology came to influence the produc-

[64] In contrast to the mighty arm of pharaoh imagery, Strawn notes that the outstretched arm of Aten more closely corresponds to the biblical usage, since the latter speaks of a deity and is often associated with benevolence, not violence.

[65] While Strawn places this discussion under the heading of "connection," the issues he addresses are identical to those that I refer to in terms of "contiguity."

tion of texts and images in later periods and places.[66] As a result, Strawn believes that both the visual and verbal data might indeed reflect "the presence of the right motifs in the right areas at about the right times," even if the specific mechanisms of contact remain unclear.[67] Thus, it is only by establishing both image-text congruence *and* contiguity that Strawn is able to venture the following conclusion: "Perhaps, then, Yahweh's outstretched arm in the Hebrew Bible is simply another instance or reflex of this kind of New Kingdom Egyptian—even Amarnan—influence."[68]

Strawn is not alone in his interest in carrying out a mode of iconographic exegesis that carefully attends to questions about image-text contiguity. While non-contiguous comparisons have been employed in some areas of biblical scholarship—and even more outside of this field—this approach is relatively rare within recent contributions to iconographic exegesis. Indeed, it is almost impossible to find biblical iconographic research that compares non-ANE images (say, eighth-century C.E. Mayan art) with texts from the Hebrew Bible. Or, if such a study were to exist, it most likely would not be referred to as "iconographic exegesis."[69] Even Porter's reading of the Behistun relief and Smith's analysis of the Mesopotamian banquet seal might best be thought of as creative non-contiguous comparisons, not poorly executed analyses of image-text congruency or contiguity.

However, a number of recent scholars have challenged the notion that comparative work should be limited to contiguous phenomena, and as a result, they have acknowledged that comparative research can serve less contextually-specific ends.[70] For instance, Jonathan Z. Smith notes that the very process of comparison is a hermeneutical endeavor, "the result of mental operations undertaken by scholars in the interest of their intellectual goals."[71] In other words, different comparative methods can serve different interpretive goals. Analogical comparisons—those based on perceived sim-

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[66] Strawn, "Yahweh's Outstretched Arm," 185–88. For instance, Henrietta A. Groenewegen-Frankfurt argues that the Amarna iconographic program continued to influence Egyptian art for at least two centuries after the death of Akhenaten (*Arrest and Movement: An Essay on Space and Time in the Representational Art of the Ancient Near East* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 110.

[67] Strawn, "Yahweh's Outstretched Arm," 188.

[68] Ibid., 188.

[69] Terms such as "biblical art history" or even "visual exegesis" are sometimes used to describe wider, inter-cultural comparisons of images and biblical texts.

[70] Specifically, Smith notes that rigidly excluding the comparison of non-contiguous data has functioned as a type of "smug excuse for jettisoning the comparative enterprise and for purging scholarship of all but the most limited comparisons" (Smith, "In Comparison a Magic Dwells," in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* [ed. Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000], 29).

[71] Smith, "The 'End' of Comparison: Redescription and Rectification," in *A Magic Still Dwells*, 239.

ilarities that do not derive from a direct or genetic dependence—might well stand alongside studies that seek to uncover historical mechanisms of contact and direct lines of influence.[72] It might even be the case that widening the scope of the comparison can prompt new and fruitful ways of envisioning both objects of study.[73]

An example of what might qualify as a non-contiguous study in iconographic exegesis is William P. Brown's *Seeing the Psalms*. While Brown admits that the psalms maintain "points of contact with the surrounding culture through the use of shared images," he nevertheless moves quickly between images from different historical and geographical contexts with little interest in establishing how specific visual artifacts might have become accessible to or known by the original authors or readers of the psalms.[74] Thus, instead of only drawing on Syro-Palestinian visual materials from a specific time period, Brown works with a wider, inter-cultural network of ANE art. His interpretive goal, so it seems, is not to demonstrate clear lines of influence or plausible mechanisms of contact between Syro-Palestinian art and the Psalter. Instead, he utilizes an extensive network of ANE images as a type of evocative visual context through which his readers can more fully encounter the theology of the psalms.[75]

This is not to say that Brown is uninterested in historical analysis. Indeed, he takes seriously the fact that the language of the psalms—and thus its theological imagination—is "fraught with background, both visual and discursive."[76] Gaining access to that background, whether through ANE iconography or any other means, is a matter of historical analysis. Nevertheless, Brown's primary goal is not to provide a rigorous evaluation of the historical context of either the images or texts he studies. Rather, through a comparison of non-contiguous (or at least not explicitly contiguous) images and texts, Brown prompts his readers to visualize the figurative language of the psalms as a way of more fully appreciating its poetry and more fully

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[72] See Smith's discussion in *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion 14; Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 47–51.

[73] This approach to comparative methods is more evident outside of biblical scholarship. For instance, in his survey of comparative methods, Strawn notes the work of Earl Roy Miner, a scholar from the field of comparative literature who emphasizes that real comparison involves the study of objects from multiple cultural traditions (Strawn, "Comparative Approaches," 127–29). See Earl Roy Miner, *Comparative Poetics: An Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

[74] Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, 13.

[75] Ibid., 12–13.

[76] Ibid, 14. Elsewhere, Brown contends that a metaphor is a figure of speech that "cavorts with the visual" (ibid., 8).

engaging their own theological imagination.[77] In other words, Brown is as much concerned with what images do for his contemporary readers as he is with what images did for the Psalter's ancient authors.

It is with this in mind that a word of caution must be registered against LeMon's critique of Brown's method. As previously discussed (§1.2), LeMon contends that Brown has not "dealt adequately with the issue of cultural particularity" and that his methodology "presumes too easy a correspondence between biblical image and ancient Near Eastern art."[78] Though cogent, LeMon's analysis seems to presume that the goals of Brown's comparative study are the same as his own—that is, the historical-critical analysis of contiguous images and texts. But this does not seem to be the case. LeMon sets out to demonstrate how a specific constellation of Syro-Palestinian wing iconography influenced the development of the Psalter's language concerning Yahweh's winged form(s), and so his argument depends closely on matters of contiguity (i.e., geographical and chronological proximity). However, Brown rarely offers explicit arguments about influence. Instead, he evokes ANE art as an analogous phenomenon, a way of sparking the contemporary reader's ability to imagine, or visualize, a concept in fresh and new ways. As a result, in many cases he transitions from discussions of images to discussions of texts by simply saying, "So also in the psalms."[79] Thus, it is not so much that Brown fails to deal with the issue of cultural particularity as it is that his method of comparison traffics in wider, inter-cultural comparisons for the purposes of theological reflection. Put simply, Brown and LeMon seem to have a different sense of what constitutes a "relationship" between ancient images and the language of certain psalms.

Recognizing that Brown's comparative method differs from that of LeMon should not exempt Brown from critique. One of the chief weaknesses of his otherwise insightful study is Brown's failure to sufficiently clarify the nature of his comparative method.[80] Nevertheless, what is clear

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[77] Brown describes metaphorical language as the work of imagination on the part of the author (ibid., 8). However, Brown also notes that "what is written with imagination must also be read with imagination" (ibid., 9). It seems that Brown is chiefly concerned with this latter issue, and as such, he uses ANE art as a means of spurring on the imagination of his contemporary reader.

[78] LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 21.

[79] See, for instance, Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, 21. In this sense, Brown's approach seems to share much in common with Keel's interests in *Symbolism.*

[80] Contributing to this lack of methodological clarity is Brown's inconsistent use of terms such as "icon," "iconic," "image," "imagery," "iconography," and "iconic metaphor." This issue is noted in LeMon's study (*Yahweh's Winged Form*, 17) as well as number of reviews. See Timothy Saleska, review of William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor*, *CBQ* 65 (2003): 600–1; and James Crenshaw, review of William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor*, *Interpretation* 57 (2003): 303–4.

is that Brown and LeMon approach the questions of image-text contiguity from two different perspectives. While the contextual approach remains the dominant comparative paradigm within iconographic exegesis, it is important to note that non-contiguous comparisons of ANE art and the Hebrew Bible remain viable ways of talking about the image-text relationship.

3.2.4. Conclusions

The preceding discussion has attempted to delineate how biblical iconographers have talked about and described the image-text relationship in past research. These discussions primarily address one (or more) of three issues: image-text congruence, correlation, or contiguity. These three issues reflect different ways in which biblical iconographers have conceptualized what it means for an image and text to be "related," and accordingly, each seeks to answer a different set of interpretive questions. Approaches that focus on the issue of image-text *congruence* typically seek to identify not only which images and texts are similar but also the extent to which they are similar. The issue of image-text *correlation* involves analyzing both the type and direction of interaction that obtains between the visual and verbal data being compared. Finally, the issue of image-text *contiguity* raises important questions about whether images and texts must come from the same historical context in order to be considered related to one another. Although each of these issues reflects a different way of approaching the image-text relationship, they are not unrelated: while image-text correlation seeks to explain the presence of similarities between certain images and texts (i.e., congruence), image-text contiguity seeks to historicize the interactions between visual and verbal data (i.e., correlation) through discernable lines of influence and/or plausible mechanisms of contact.

This typology not only provides a framework for understanding the major lines of inquiry that have characterized past approaches to iconographic exegesis but it also clarifies how understandings of the image-text relationship have shifted over time. In summary, several trends are evident: (1) In terms of image-text *congruence*, by carefully considering both the literary and artistic contexts at hand, biblical iconographers are now offering more precise analyses of the similarities that obtain between ever-larger constellations of literary imagery and iconographic motifs; (2) with respect to image-text *correlation*, the dominant paradigm has shifted from illustration to illumination, with the latter focusing on how images and texts are mutually dependent on a common mental concept; and (3) in terms of image-text *contiguity*, while the majority of biblical iconographers work with contiguous images and texts, it is also possible to compare non-contiguous data in service of interpretive goals that are less historical-critical in orientation.

How might a greater awareness of these trends help inform the development of a visual hermeneutics? First, rather than advocating for a uniform method of dealing with the image-text relationship, the above typology reveals the need for biblical scholars to be more explicit about which aspects of the image-text relationship they are addressing and how these decisions inform their methodological procedures. Doing so would not only entail a more consistent use of terminology throughout the field but would also involve a more careful appraisal of how certain approaches relate to one another. Second, while past approaches to iconographic exegesis can be characterized according to how they treat issues related to congruence, correlation, and continuity, these concerns hardly begin to exhaust what can be said about the interactions that obtain between images and texts. Despite the significant advances made within each of these issues, certain methodological problems concerning the image-text relationship remain unresolved in iconographic exegesis. What is needed in these cases is a fresh engagement with theories about the image-text relationship generated in other disciplines, especially visual culture studies. By providing new ways of conceptualizing the relationship between visual and verbal data, these theories can further refine a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies. Such issues will occupy the remainder of this chapter.

3.3. The Image-Text Relationship in Visual Theory

Iconographic exegesis is not the only discipline interested in the image-text relationship. Visual culture studies and certain forms of art history and literary criticism also routinely explore this topic, often under the heading "word and image."[81] While this terminology is commonly found in the literature of these fields, it often carries different connotations. In some instances, word and image refers to a highly schematic way of structuring either diverse fields of academic inquiry (literary criticism and art history) or distinct approaches to representation more broadly (semiotics and aes-

[81] While "word and image" seems to be the most common way of referring to visual and verbal forms of representation in these fields, other terms are often employed interchangeably, such as: picture and text, icon and logos, art and language. For the sake of consistency, I primarily use "image and text" throughout this study. It should also be noted that Mitchell develops unique typographical conventions for representing different aspects of the relationship between image and text: "image/text" designates the problematic gap between how these two media signify; "imagetext" refers to composite or hybrid works that blend visual and verbal media; and "image-text" draws attention to the specific structure of relations between visual and verbal data (see *Picture Theory*, 89 n. 9). In light of the concerns of this present study, I follow Mitchell in using the hyphen (image-text).

thetics, discourse and display, the sayable and the seeable).[82] Thus construed, word and image becomes a shorthand way of designating broader categories of intellectual discourse.

Closely related but even wider in scope, word and image occasionally functions as a basic cultural trope that evokes differences between what are perceived to be opposite kinds of things: poetry and painting, books and television, elite and popular, orthodoxy and idolatry.[83] From this vantage point, word and image is, as Mitchell contends, "a deceptively simple label" that refers not only to two different forms of representation but also to a site of deeply contested cultural and religious values.[84]

Finally, in its most specific form word and image serves as an apt description of the subject matter of a variety of inter-artistic comparisons, especially those that study the relationship between certain visual and verbal materials (i.e., a poem and a painting) or the conjunction of word and image within the same object (i.e., film, cartoons, advertisements, graffiti, etc.). This latter conceptualization of word and image most closely adheres to the sorts of interests on display in iconographic exegesis (i.e., the relationship between ANE art and the Hebrew Bible) and is the main focus of the following discussion.

3.3.1. Past Approaches: Image versus Text and Image as Text

Inter-artistic comparisons of visual and verbal media feature prominently in recent contributions to visual culture studies, not to mention a host of other interdisciplinary fields. Yet, while interest in the image-text relationship seems to be "trending" in contemporary academic discourse, Mitchell is right to note that this issue constitutes an "extraordinarily ancient problem" in Western thought, one which can be traced back at least to classical Greek

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[82] Mitchell, "Word and Image," in *Critical Terms for Art History* (2d ed.; eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 47.

[83] Idem, *Picture Theory*, 4. Elsewhere, Mitchell says, "We imagine the gulf between words and images to be as wide as the one between words and things, between (in the largest sense) culture and nature" (*Iconology*, 43).

[84] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 3. One might recall here the popular work of Neil Postman (*Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* [New York: Penguin, 1985]) and his belief that the image-rich medium of television has led to the downfall of American culture. In a similar fashion, Mitchell cites a 1988 NEH report titled "Humanities in America" that decries the hours Americans spend watching TV on the basis, at least in part, that images "compose a medium quite distinct from print, one that communicates differently, one that achieves excellence differently" (Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 1). The logocentric tendencies of biblical scholarship have already been noted in chapter 2 of this study.

philosophy.[85] Space prohibits a lengthy review of the history of scholarship and so it will be helpful for the purposes of the present study to identify two polarities, or opposite ends of a continuum, that characterize past approaches to the image-text relationship in visual theory: "image versus text" and "image as text."

In the former approach, scholars conceptualize the image-text relationship in terms of opposition, difference, or even incompatibility. In the latter approach, an effort is made to heal the divide between the two media by drawing attention to how these forms of representation might be mutually compatible with one another. While one can surely identify mediating approaches to the image-text relationship (i.e., "image and text," "image with text," etc.), these two more extreme positions tend to garner the most attention, or at least generate the sharpest debates.

Of these two approaches, the most ancient, if not the most persistent, is the one that underscores conflict, opposition, and difference between visual and verbal representation. In fact, French philosopher Gilles Deleuze considers the antimony of word and image to be something of a historical *a priori*.[86] From Plato's *Cratylus* to Leonardo's *paragone*, it has often been asserted that images and texts are distinct types of media that signify in fundamentally different ways: images, as natural signs, illustrate, copy, exemplify, and document the world in an unmediated fashion; words, in contrast, are purely conventional and function as unmotivated signs.[87] Although this perspective can take on various forms, it is possible to trace a long history of scholars who construct boundary lines between visual and verbal materials or who, like Rorty and the later Wittgenstein, are determined to "get the visual, and in particular the mirroring, metaphor out of our speech altogether."[88]

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[85] Mitchell, "Word and Image," 49.

[86] Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 60.

[87] In Plato's *Cratylus* the issue at sake has to do with how words (not images) signify. Commenting on Plato's *Cratylus* in his own discussion of the conventionality of words and images, Ernst Gombrich contends that "What matters is that the participants in Plato's dialogue take it for granted that—whatever may hold for words—pictures [and] visual images are natural signs" (Gombrich, "Image and Code: Scope and Limits of Conventionalism in Pictorial Representations," in *The Image and the Eye* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982], 278). However, as Mitchell points out, Socrates also begins to undermine the mimetic view of images as well (Mitchell, *Iconology*, 92). Noting that images cannot possibly reproduce all the qualities of that to which they refer (*Cratylus*, 432c–d; 165), Socrates concludes that images signify by both likeness and unlikeness, and thus they, like words, work by custom and convention (*Cratylus*, 435a–b; 173).

[88] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 371. See also Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (trans G. E. M. Anscombe; New York: Macmillan, 1953).

But the "image versus text" approach does more than just engender a disciplinary divide between literary criticism and art history, linguistic philosophy and visual representation. This approach tends to reify ethical judgments about the value of different forms of media. As Mitchell aptly puts it, images are often seen as a type of foil to texts, its (less) "significant other."[89] Put simply, in this "war of signs," scholars have often chosen the side of words. Yet on this point, it should be noted that images and words are often evaluated according to a different set of rules. For instance, some thinkers, such as Leonardo, perceive painting to be superior to poetry because the former imitates, or more directly mirrors, the natural world. In other cases, the exact opposite point is made: word is superior to image because it is independent from the natural world and thus more objectively tied to thought and reason.[90]

The "image versus text" approach to visual-verbal interactions is especially evident in research that attempts to define what separates images from texts and to allocate to each type of medium its proper role and essence. In fact, one of the central aims of Mitchell's *Iconology*, the first of his influential volumes on the image-text relationship, is to examine how four prominent figures—Nelson Goodman, Ernst Gombrich, G. E. Lessing, and Edmund Burke—exemplify the various ways in which boundary lines have been drawn between images and texts. Such borders are often constructed around distinctions between seeing and hearing (Burke), space and time (Lessing), nature and convention (Gombrich), and the density of symbolic systems (Goodman). While Mitchell attempts to call into question the adequacy of each of these distinctions as general, theoretical solutions to the problem of image-text difference, what is evident throughout *Iconology* is that the impulse to separate, oppose, and differentiate between images and texts is a prominent theme in Western thought, even among scholars who are otherwise known to push the boundaries of traditional distinctions between these two forms of media.[91]

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[89] Mitchell, *Iconology*, 47.

[90] For a helpful discussion of this point, see Zainab Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (Archaeology, Culture, and Society; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 89–95.

[91] This latter statement applies especially well to Goodman and Gombrich. For instance, while Gombrich is well known for challenging the notion that images are natural signs, he nevertheless acknowledges a limit to pictorial conventionalism and, especially in his later work, maintains some distinctions between how images and texts signify. See Gombrich, "Image and Code," 278–97. Goodman asserts an even more radical version of pictorial conventionalism. However, he, too, still falls back on ways of distinguishing between images and texts, and as a result, he differentiates between the type of convention evident in each form of representation. In this view, an image, unlike a word, is a dense or replete sign insofar as every compositional difference in an image is filled with semantic potential. See espe-

In spite of these trends—or perhaps because of them—numerous art historians, literary critics, and visual culture theorists have come to question the divide between image and text and, conversely, have drawn attention to points of connection and exchange between these two forms of media. Rather than understanding the relationship in terms of a conflict or contest, these scholars might be said to think about images and texts as "two just and friendly neighbors, neither of whom indeed is allowed to take unseemly liberties in the heart of the other's domain, but who exercise mutual forbearance on the borders."[92]

This impulse to broker a peaceful settlement between images and texts is central to Horace's dictum *ut pictura poesis* (as is painting, so is poetry) and undergirds the various types of inter-artistic comparisons that emerge out of the "Sister Arts" tradition.[93] Rather than relegating images and texts to different disciplines of study, this tradition orchestrates a conversation between these two media, the results of which are of interest to art historians and literary critics alike. Yet, in its most developed form, the "image as text" approach moves beyond inter-artistic comparisons and seeks to establish an indissociable relationship between the two media. This suturing is often accomplished by means of a semiotic theory that affirms that images, like texts, are conventional signs and that everything from paintings to photographs, modern art to monumental architecture is, as Mitchell would say, "fraught with 'textuality' and 'discourse.'"[94]

One outcome of this "image as text" approach is that it is now rather commonplace to think of images as a type of language that can be read, and conversely, to regard texts as having an artistic (or visual) dimension that is worthy of consideration. It is thus the case that texts and images are increasingly thought of as mutually interchangeable signs, each being able to

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cially the final chapter in Goodman, *The Languages of Art*, 225–66. This issue is treated more extensively in chapter 4 of the present study.

[92] G. E. Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (trans. Ellen Frothingham; Boston: Roberts Brother, 1877 [1776]), 116.

[93] The term "Sister Arts" is most commonly associated with Victorian interest in comparing various art forms, mainly painting and poetry. Inter-artistic comparisons have also been the subject of much recent research at the intersection of literary studies and art history. See, for instance, Jean Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); Mario Praz, *Mnemosyne: The Parallel between Literature and the Visual Arts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); Chauncey Brewster Tinker, *Painter and Poet: Studies in the Literary Relations of English Painting* (repr. ed.; Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries, 1969 [1938]); and Wendy Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

[94] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 14. See especially the work of Gombrich (*Art and Illusion*) and Goodman (*The Languages of Art*), as well as the important article by Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *Art Bulletin* 73 (1991): 174–208.

stand in as a surrogate for the other.[95] As a result, in spite of Marshall McLuhan's widely accepted dictum "the medium is the message," this approach to the image-text relationship affirms quite the opposite. As Mitchell puts it, "communicative, expressive acts, narration, argument, description, exposition, and other so-called 'speech acts' are not medium-specific, are not 'proper' to some medium or other."[96] In other words, there is a reciprocity of image and text such that data can be freely exchanged and easily translated from one medium to the other.[97]

These two approaches— "images versus texts" and "image as text"— are no less evident in biblical studies. On the one hand, fueled by a long history of iconoclastic perspectives in Jewish and Christian theological traditions, many biblical scholars have dismissed ancient visual artifacts as mere decorations or have denigrated them as evidence of unorthodox, or even idolatrous, practices. While these scholars often do not explicitly address the image-text relationship, their work implies that texts have a greater implicit value when it comes expressing, transmitting, and structuring religious thought, and correspondingly, when it comes to religio-historical research. Yet, on the other hand, hints of an "image as text" approach can be detected in some quarters of biblical studies, especially since the rise of the Fribourg School in the 1970s.[98] In these past several decades, scholars interested in an iconographic approach have come to recognize the ways in which ancient art, much like ancient texts, functioned as a type of media and even as a form of language that can be read, parsed, and learned as a meaningful form of communication (see ch. 2). What the Fribourg School has essentially done is to apply to the study of ancient images the analytical tools and perspectives more commonly used in the study of ancient texts. Thus, while the "image versus text" approach is still predominant in biblical studies, the "image as text" approach has gained traction and is implicit in many past contributions to iconographic exegesis.

In this sense, how the image-text relationship has been navigated in biblical studies broadly reflects trends in other disciplines in the humanities: namely, (1) the two polarities in the continuum—opposition and mutuality—are both evident in the underlying hermeneutical framework, though not necessarily in equal measure; and (2) little attention has been given mediating positions in the continuum—that is, approaches that recognize and

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[95] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 210.

[96] Ibid., 160.

[97] François Meltzer, *Salome and the Dance of Writing: Portraits of Mimesis in Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 21. As referenced by Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 155.

[98] Much of the same might be said of ancient Near Eastern research more broadly. Art historian Zainab Bahrani notes that an effort to bridge the disciplinary divide between visual and verbal studies is evident in the work of Anthony Green, Julian E. Reade, Franz Wiggerman, and Irene Winter, not to mention her own scholarship (*The Graven Image*, 99).

explore a more complex or even dialectical relationship between images and texts.

3.3.2. New Approaches from W. J. T. Mitchell

In the past several decades, Mitchell has emerged as arguably the most influential figure in discussions about the image-text relationship. Two of Mitchell's major works, *Iconology* (1986) and *Picture Theory* (1994) offer a sustained, theoretically-nuanced examination of the relationship between visual and verbal data, especially in contemporary art and everyday nonart objects. In these volumes, Mitchell wrestles with the essential nature of images and pictures, including how they relate to texts.[99] While Mitchell frequently reflects on aspects of the image-as-text and image-versus-text approaches discussed above, his own treatment of the image-text relationship is unique. Specifically, Mitchell develops two new theories—the image-text dialectic and the metapicture—as a way of further conceptualizing the relationship between visual and verbal data. While these theories have made an important contribution to visual theory, they have yet to be explored within the methods and practices of iconographic exegesis, and for that matter, ancient art history. In the remainder of this chapter, I briefly outline these two theories (§§3.3.2.1-2) before evaluating how they might apply to ancient visual culture (§3.4). In the final section (§3.5), I reflect more specifically on how Mitchell's theories might further inform the way in which scholars understand the nature of the relationship between ancient art and the Bible, especially as it pertains to image-text congruency, correlation, and contiguity.

3.3.2.1. The Image-Text Dialectic

One unique characteristic of Mitchell's work on the image-text relationship is how he attempts to chart a middle course between the "image versus text" and "image as text" approaches discussed above. Instead of either reifying or collapsing differences between images and texts, Mitchell maintains that these two forms of representation exhibit a dialectical tension between similarity and difference, rupture and union. In Mitchell's view, this dialectical interaction between image and text occurs not only between discrete forms of media but also within individual objects that combine visual

[99] In Mitchell's view, *Picture Theory* attempts to raise questions about pictures that *Iconology* raises about images (*Picture Theory*, 5). In making this distinction between his two volumes, Mitchell draws on a subtle difference in terminology. For Mitchell, an "image" refers to the whole realm of iconicity while "picture" designates a specific kind of visual representation. For further discussion, see ibid., 4 n. 5.

and verbal data. Thus oriented, Mitchell's work consistently seeks to explore the structure of this dialectic, to interrogate its borders, and to inspect possible crossings and mergers.

In terms of the dialectic between discrete images and texts, much of Mitchell's interest is focused on the interplay of different "moments" or phases in a viewer's response to the phenomenon of ekphrasis—that is, the verbal description of visual representation.[100] On the one hand, Mitchell speaks of a viewer's experience of "ekphrastic indifference"—that is, the realization that words can never fully describe what images depict. Mitchell puts it this way:

> No amount of description . . . adds up to a depiction. A verbal representation cannot represent—that is, make present—its object in the same way a visual representation can. It may refer to an object, describe it, invoke it, but it can never bring its visual presence before us in the way pictures do. Words can "cite," but never "sight" their objects.[101]

The recognition of the impossibility of ekphrastic reproduction can readily give way to a more charged sense of "ekphrastic fear." This transition occurs when "the difference between verbal and visual mediation becomes a moral, aesthetic imperative rather than (as in the first, 'indifferent' phrase of ekphrasis) a natural fact."[102] In this moment of response, the potential reciprocity between image and text is no longer seen as a mere impossibility, but rather is treated as a "dangerous promiscuity" that threatens to dissolve the borders between visual and verbal signs.[103] To give voice to the mute image is to endow it with a type of life, agency, and power that verges on the idolatrous or fetishistic.[104] And yet, in spite of the experience of both indifference and fear, Mitchell maintains that a viewer's encounter with the image-text relationship is also imbued with "ekphrastic hope." In this phase of response, the viewer acknowledges that "the impossibility of ekphrasis can be overcome in imagination and metaphor, when we discover

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[100] From its legendary origins in the "Shield of Achilles" in Homer's *Iliad* to its place in ancient rhetoric, the idea of ekphrasis has captured the attention of poets and critics alike. Mitchell offers an insightful analysis of the image-text dialectic in several well-known examples of ekphrastic poetry (*Picture Theory*, esp. 165–81). For a broader introduction to scholarship on ekphrasis, see Grant F. Scott, "The Rhetoric of Dilation: Ekphrasis and Ideology," *Word & Image* 7 (1991): 301–10; Shahar Bram, "Ekphrasis as a Shield: Ekphrasis and the Mimetic Tradition," *Word & Image* 22 (2006): 372–78; Michael Squire, "Ekphrasis at the Forge and the Forging of Ekphrasis: The 'Shield of Achilles' in Graeco-Roman Word and Image," *Word & Image* 29 (2013): 157–91.

[101] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 152.

[102] Ibid., 154.

[103] Ibid., 155.

[104] Ibid., 156.

a 'sense' in which language can do what so many writers have wanted it to do: 'to make us see.'"[105] If ekphrastic indifference and fear try to deny and denounce, respectively, the possibility that images and texts signify in the same way, ekphrastic hope affirms that these two media can communicate very similar messages.[106]

In Mitchell's theory, ekphrastic indifference, fear, and hope do not describe different inter-artistic philosophies or distinct semiotic strategies. Rather, they are moments or stages *within a single viewer's response to the image-text relationship*. They reflect the "pervasive sense of ambivalence" that a viewer experiences as she tries to negotiate her impulse to affirm, deny, or denounce the notion that texts can reliably translate the language of images, or conversely, that images can sufficiently illustrate the content of texts. Understood in this way, Mitchell's dialectic not only refers to the interplay of similarity and difference between discrete forms of media but also characterizes a way of seeing, or a visual hermeneutics, in which a viewer's commitment to an "image versus text" or "image as text" perspective continually shifts and dissolves, never fully or finally settling on any one manner of conceptualizing the relationship. As a result, Mitchell is less interested in defining the difference between images and texts (i.e., how they signify, what they do) than he is in exploring what difference this dialectic makes in how a viewer responds to or engages with the image-text relationship. By redirecting his analysis from the nature of images and texts to the nature of visuality and visual response more broadly, Mitchell seeks to expose "a struggle that carries the fundamental contradictions of our culture into the heart of theoretical discourse."[107]

At the same time, Mitchell also maintains that a dialectic occurs *within* particular forms of media. In fact, Mitchell problematizes the simple resolution of word and image into isolated categories of signs, insisting that "pure" forms of both media are elusive. Instead, he regards every medium as, at least potentially, "a heterogeneous field of representational practices."[108] Put simply, in Mitchell's view all art is composite and all media is mixed. For instance, in his treatment of the question "What is an Image?" Mitchell sketches genealogical lines of connection between various types of "images," including literary, pictorial, and mental ones.[109] In this "family tree," divisions between visual and verbal representations are neither static nor stable, and as a result, the categories of word and image become twist-

[105] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 152.
[106] Ibid., 160–1. This idea is nuanced and challenged in further detail below (§4.2).
[107] Idem, *Iconology*, 44.
[108] Idem, *Picture Theory*, 100.
[109] Idem, "What is an Image?" *New Literary History* 15 (1984): 503–37

ed together, more like vines than branches.[110] In this view, various media exist along a continuum of representational practices that exhibit both visual and verbal characteristics at one and the same time while never being fully and purely image or text.

Along these same lines, Mitchell's image-text dialectic recognizes the ways in which it is difficult to keep visuality out of the written word. In speaking about the visuality of texts, Mitchell emphasizes that writing itself is a way of making language visible. That is to say, virtually all forms of the written word are meant to be seen, or rather, it is only through being seen that they can be read and thus work as a means of communication.

This point is especially apt when it comes to the earliest forms of language. In his edited volume, *Visible Language*, Christopher Woods points out that the earliest writing systems were all rooted in the visible realm through pictographic signs of one sort or another.[111] While the nature of pictograms vary, they all at some level convey meaning through a certain degree of resemblance with the object to which they refer. It is only through time that pictograms become increasingly symbolic (i.e., conventional and abstract) and thus, as Woods puts it, "become bleached of their iconicity and lose the visual similarity that they once shared with the referents."[112] Woods continues:

> The degree to which iconicity is lost depends in part upon the medium of writing and the relationship between art and text. In Mesopotamia, where writing was done on clay, graphs became less iconic and more symbolic once they were no longer drawn with curvilinear lines but rather pressed into the clay in wedge-like strokes. But in Egypt and Mesoamerica, where the bond between art and writing was greater, in part owing to the use of the pen and the brush, iconicity was retained to a much higher degree.[113]

In either case, Woods, not unlike Mitchell, makes the case that the earliest stages of writing retain a type of ancestry with the realm of pictures.

At the same time, Mitchell also notes the ways in which images are "contaminated" with text. He argues that the pictorial field is "a complex medium that is always already mixed and heterogeneous, situated within institutions, histories, and discourses: the image understood, in short, as an

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[110] A similar approach is offered by James Elkins, *The Domain of Images* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), esp. 82–94. However, instead of using a family tree to categorize different forms of representation, Elkins speaks of overlapping "domains."

[111] Christopher Woods, Emily Teeter, and Geoff Emberling, eds., *Visible Language: Inventions of Writing in the Ancient Middle East and Beyond* (Oriental Institute Museum Publications 32; Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2010), 19–21.

[112] Ibid., 22.

[113] Ibid., 22.

imagetext."[114] More than just indicating that images can be read as a type of language, Mitchell contends that the texts with which we compare an image might already reside in the image itself, even if they are not readily visible.[115] Even abstract art—a style which is often understood to suppress language—is predicated on a discourse of criticism and philosophy that primarily resides in the world of written texts: *ut pictura theoria*. Or as American journalist Tom Wolfe quips, "these days, without a theory to go with it, I can't see a painting."[116] What Mitchell and Wolfe both suggest is that just as it is difficult to keep visuality out of the written word, so too is difficult to keep discourse out of the visual arts. These media, in the end, are unavoidably mixed.

Thus, Mitchell's visual theory attempts to account for the complex ways in which images and texts interact not only between discrete forms of media but also within countless varieties of "imagetexts." These tensions are neither fully resolvable nor completely avoidable. In fact, as noted in the epigraph to this chapter, Mitchell contends that "the dialectic of word and image seems to be a constant in the fabric of signs that a culture weaves around itself. What varies is the precise nature of the weave, the relation of warp and woof."[117] In this way, rather than trying to solve the image-text relationship with a master theory, Mitchell attempts to historicize it, to see what "interests and powers" it serves in different historical and intellectual settings.[118] Or, to put the matter differently, if there *is* a master theory, it seems that it would consist of a persistent set of questions about the dialectical nature of visual-verbal interactions in various artifacts and diverse historical contexts.

3.3.2.2. The Metapicture

The second important characteristic of Mitchell's theory is the notion of the metapicture or hypericon—that is, a picture or image that comments on or refers to other pictures or images.[119] In developing the idea of a metapicture, Mitchell intends to do more than just reiterate the point that art can and should be used to interpret other art, or that specific iconographic mo-

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[114] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 98.

[115] Ibid., 98.

[116] As quoted in ibid., 220. See Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), 4.

[117] Mitchell, *Iconology*, 43.

[118] Ibid., 44.

[119] Idem, *Picture Theory*, 65. Strictly speaking, a "metapicture" is a picture about a picture, while a "hypericon" is an image about an image. However, in this study I use the term "metapicture" for both phenomena so as to limit—even if slightly! —the proliferation of technical terms.

tifs emerge from and relate to a long history of prototypes. Rather, through this concept Mitchell aims to explore "the notion that pictures might be capable of reflection on themselves, capable of providing second-order discourse that tells us—or at least shows us—something about pictures."[120]

In certain instances, the formal features and/or subject matter of an image can lend themselves to being construed as a metapicture. This would be the case with pictures of artists drawing pictures, images that include depictions of mirrors or reflections, or instances where multiple images appear in a single gestalt. In these cases, images and/or other visual phenomena are the subject of a second-order image, and as such, the second-order image can be seen as commenting on or interpreting the act of depiction itself. Beyond these particular examples, the self-referentiality that is characteristic of a metapicture is not typically an intrinsic property of given image but rather is "a pragmatic, functional feature, a matter of use and context."[121] That is to say, the idea of a metapicture is part of an interpretive strategy, a way of thinking about the nature of images and visuality through the lens of specific works of art.

Mitchell's most sustained treatment of this concept comes in the second chapter of *Picture Theory* where he analyzes several examples of metapictures, most of which come from modern art or popular culture. For instance, one of the metapictures that draws Mitchell's attention is the famous duck-rabbit (**fig. 3.7**), an ambiguous image that can be seen either as a duck or a rabbit. In his analysis, Mitchell sees the duck-rabbit as commenting on pictorial "multistability"—that is, figures that can be understood as referring simultaneously to different things and in which the image's referent seems to shift back and forth depending on the view's focus.[122]

More broadly, Mitchell's analysis identifies three main types of metapictures according to the form of self-referentiality on display: namely, whether the picture (1) refers to itself, (2) other pictures, or (3) the nature of visual representation more broadly.[123] Mitchell notes that this last category can also include metapictures that function as "a representation of the relation between discourse and representation, a picture about the gap between words and pictures."[124] In other words, there are metapictures that might be

[120] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 38.

[121] Ibid., 57.

[122] The history of scholarship on the duck-rabbit is itself a fascinating topic. Since its first appearance in the satirical German magazine *Fliegende Blätter* in 1892, the duck-rabbit has featured prominently in the work of Ernst Gombrich, Joseph Jastrow, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Interestingly, LeMon also references the duck-rabbit as a way of explaining the "multistability" he perceives in the imagery of Yahweh's winged form(s) in the psalms (*Yahweh's Winged Form*, 192).

[123] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 56.

[124] Ibid., 65.

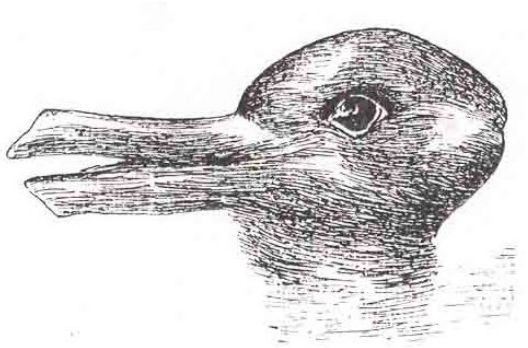

Figure 3.7. The duck-rabbit. After LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 192.

used to gain insight into the nature of the image-text relationship. As an example of this latter type of metapicture, Mitchell analyzes the surrealist painter René Magritte's famous *La trahison des images* ("The Treachery of Images;" **fig. 3.8**).[125]

Mitchell, like numerous other critics including Foucault, seizes upon this provocative image as an occasion to put pressure on how we understand the relationship between what words say and what images show.[126] In Magritte's painting, the image and text are clearly linked—the writing appears just behind the drawing and at first glance might readily be construed as a type of label or caption. Yet upon closer inspection, the statement itself ("Ceci n'est pas une pipe") refuses to play the part of an indexical label or descriptive caption. There is an incommensurability of image and text, a contradiction between what is seen and what is read. The narrow strip of space that separates image from text in *La trahison des images* becomes, as Foucault would have it, "a crevasse—an uncertain, foggy region" that aims to diffuse the viewer's impulse to make this picture play according to the rules of illustration or to make the text conform to the goals of ekphrasis.[127] Foucault further claims that in comparison to the traditional use of legends on, say, a map, the image-text relationship in Magritte's picture is doubly paradoxical: not only does the text set out to name something that likely needs no such identification (the realistic pipe is easy enough to recognize) but it denies or negates the very name the viewer would want to give to the image.[128]

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[125] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 64–76.

[126] Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe* (trans. and rev. by James Harkness; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983 [French original: 1973]).

[127] Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, 28.

[128] Ibid., 23–24.

Figure 3.8. René Magritte, *La trahison des images*, 1929. After Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 65 fig. 12. © 2016 C. Herscovici / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Mitchell, like numerous other critics including Foucault, seizes upon this provocative image as an occasion to put pressure on how we understand the relationship between what words say and what images show. In Magritte's painting, the image and text are clearly linked—the writing appears just behind the drawing and at first glance might readily be construed as a type of label or caption. Yet upon closer inspection, the statement itself ("Ceci n'est pas une pipe") refuses to play the part of an indexical label or descriptive caption. There is an incommensurability of image and text, a contradiction between what is seen and what is read. The narrow strip of space that separates image from text in *La trahison des images* becomes, as Foucault would have it, "a crevasse—an uncertain, foggy region" that aims to diffuse the viewer's impulse to make this picture play according to the rules of illustration or to make the text conform to the goals of ekphrasis.[129]

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By severing a logical link between the image and the text in this single visual frame, *La trahison des images* invites the viewer to return to the scene, to contemplate further the purpose for including the drawing and writing together, and to question again whether the "treachery" actually be-

[129] Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, 28.
[130] Ibid., 23–24.

longs to the image (i.e., it is a deceptive illustration) or the text (it is a misleading label). Mitchell notes, "It isn't simply that the words contradict the image, and vice versa, but that the very identities of the words and images, the sayable and the seeable, begin to shimmer and shift in the composition, as if the image could speak and the words were on display." By creating a fissure between image and text, Magritte's picture causes the viewer's handle on the image-text relationship to come undone, or, perhaps more appropriately, to go up in smoke.

Much more might be said about *La trahison des images* and the sustained attention it has received by philosophers and art critics alike. Yet, it is important to note that for Mitchell, Magritte's picture is not just a curious work of art. It is a metapicture of the image-text relationship, a commentary on our ways of seeing the interaction between visual and verbal representation. By juxtaposing a realistically drawn pipe with a simple declarative statement, the picture activates the viewer's ekphrastic hope that texts can describe, label, or name what images depict in a straightforward and unambiguous manner. And yet, by a slight change in the expected label (a single letter in the French), this hope is dashed, replaced by ekphrastic indifference and fear. Thus, *La trahison des images* not only materializes Mitchell's image-text dialectic in a concrete object but it also mobilizes it for the sake of analyzing other images. In this sense, Magritte's picture seems to be the perfect vehicle for Mitchell's visual theory. Mitchell even sees a connection between the image-text dialect and the subject of Magritte's painting. He contends, "Metapictures are all like pipes: they are instruments of reverie, provocations to idle conversation, pipe-dreams, and abstruse speculations. Like pipes, metapictures are 'smoked' or 'smoked out' and then put back in the rack. They encourage introspection, reflection, meditations on visual experience."[131]

What makes Magritte's *La trahison des images* such a compelling metapicture is not that it settles the nature of visual-verbal representation writ large. Nor is it that it offers the final word on how to read all image-text relationships, whether modern or ancient. Rather, the power of the metapicture resides in how it invites the viewer to engage the object, to look again at the text, and to re-read the image—in short, to examine her expectations about how images and texts relate to one another. In the end, it is this invitation to look again that is perhaps the most salient point when it comes to a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies. Whatever else visual theory might contribute to the methods and practices of iconographic exegesis, its principle purpose might be to prompt biblical scholars to look again at the image-text relationship and to question long-held assumptions about how visual and verbal representation interact with one another, whether between (semi-) discrete forms of media or within a single mixed-media artifact.

[131] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 72.

3.4. The Image-Text Relationship in Antiquity

Like others in the field of visual culture studies, Mitchell primary deals with modern and postmodern art, whether in the form of museum pieces or a diverse array of everyday "nonart" objects. Conversely, the study of ancient iconography, whether by biblical scholars or experts in the field of ancient art history, has only rarely turned to contemporary theory to inform its methods of analysis.[132] Yet, despite what seems to be a yawning gap between contemporary theory and ancient visual culture, the nature of the image-text relationship in the ancient world is as much in need of theoretical reflection as it is in contemporary contexts.[133] Thus, it would be potentially fruitful to consider how Mitchell's theories might further inform the analysis of ancient art, such as monumental reliefs, that juxtapose iconography with inscriptions. One such example is the previously mentioned Behistun relief.[134] Applying Mitchell's theories concerning the image-text dialectic and metapicture to this ancient monument would prompt several new lines of inquiry.

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[132] Biblical iconographers have occasionally made some mention of visual theorists. For instance, Mitchell is briefly referenced by LeMon (*Yahweh's Winged Form*, 192–93) and Strawn ("Imagery," 311) while at one point Keel cites David Freedberg's *The Power of Images* (*Das Recht*, 61). However, a more substantive engagement with contemporary visual theory can be found in two studies of ancient art outside of the field of biblical iconography. First, Whitney Davis, a professor of art history and visual theory, has made significant contributions to both ancient and modern art. While his most recent work offers an in-depth analysis of visual culture theory (*A General Theory of Visual Culture* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010]), he has also offered theoretical reflection on ancient art. Specifically, in *Masking the Blow: The Scene of Representation in Late Prehistoric Egyptian Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), Davis applies a complex theory of visual narrative to various carved cosmetic palettes from around the end of the fourth or early-third millennium B.C.E. For instance, Davis draws on Mitchell's theory of a "hypericon" to support his idea that certain images on the palettes can function as a cipher for how to read the iconography (ibid., 83, 147). Similarly, Bahrani, a professor of Ancient Near Eastern Art and Archaeology, also draws on contemporary visual theory, including Mitchell's notion of the image-text dialectic, in her work on Babylonian and Assyrian art. See especially Bahrani, *The Graven Image;* and eadem, *Rituals of War: The Body and Violence in Mesopotamia* (New York, Zone Books, 2008).

[133] While Mitchell rarely works with ancient art, he contends that issues pertaining to visuality and visual culture (including the image-text relationship) are not unique characteristics of the modern era. See, for instance, Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture," *JVC* 1 (2002): 174.

[134] The Behistun relief is one of two monuments from the time of Darius I that incorporates extensive imagery and written texts (the other is the Naqš-i Rustam tomb façade).

3.4.1. The Image-Text Dialectic in the Behistun Relief

How might Mitchell's concept of an image-text dialectic reframe our understanding of the Behistun relief? First and most generally, it would direct more scholarly attention to the interaction between visual and verbal data within the relief itself. Until recently, this interaction has, by and large, been neglected in the scholarly literature. Instead, interest in the Behistun relief has been dominated by an almost exclusive concern for its textual features, especially deciphering the cuneiform of the Old Persian texts. While Georg Friedrich Grotefend deciphered a portion of the Persian alphabetic symbols by 1802, it was Sir Henry Rawlinson who first produced a full translation of the Persian text by 1838.[135] The translation of the Persian text paved the way for the subsequent reading of the Elamite and Babylonian versions, and in many ways, the development of modern Assyriology more broadly. Beyond the question of translation, scholars have also focused on various other issues pertaining to the texts, including their historical reliability, genre, and history of construction.[136]

While text-focused approaches have undoubtedly made significant contributions to the study of the Behistun relief, the most compelling aspect of the monument is the relationship between the 10-by-18 foot sculptured panel and the trilingual inscriptions that flank it (**fig. 3.9**).[137] In fact, even a

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[135] Henry Rawlinson, *The Persian Cuneiform Inscription at Behistun, Decyphered and Translated; with a Memoir on Persian Cuneiform Inscriptions in General* (Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society 10–11; London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1846–1849). Leonard William King and Reginald Campbell Thompson later provided a revision of Rawlinson's Persian translation (*The Sculptures and Inscriptions of Darius the Great on the Rock of Behistûn* [London: British Museum, 1907]). The most recent critical translation of the Persian text is from Rüdiger Schmitt, *The Bisitun Inscription of Darius the Great: Old Persian Text* (Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum, Part I: Inscriptions of Ancient Iran 1—the Old Persian Inscriptions; London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1991]). For a brief overview of some of the issues and controversies in the decipherment of this monument, see Mogens T. Larsen, "Hincks versus Rawlinson: The Decipherment of the Cuneiform System of Writing," in *Ultra terminum vagari: Scritti in onore di Carl Nylander* (ed. Börje Magnusson et al.; Rome: Quasar, 1997), 339–56.

[136] See, for instance, Jack Balcer, *Herodotus and Bisitun: Problems in Ancient Persian Historiography* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1987); idem, "Ancient Epic Conventions in the Bisitun Text," in *Continuity and Change: Proceedings of the Last Achaemenid History Workshop* (ed. H. Sancisi-Werdenburg, Amelia Kuhrt, and Margaret Cool Root; Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 1994), 257–64; Rykle Borger, *Die Chronologie des Darius-Denkmals am Behistun-Felsen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982); and Gernot Windfuhr, "Saith Darius: Dialectic, Numbers, Time and Space at Behistun (DB, Old Persian Version)," in *Continuity and Change*, 265–81.

[137] Two notable exceptions come from Margaret Cool Root and Cindy Nimchuk, both of whom have studied the interplay of text and image in the Behistun relief. See Root, *The*

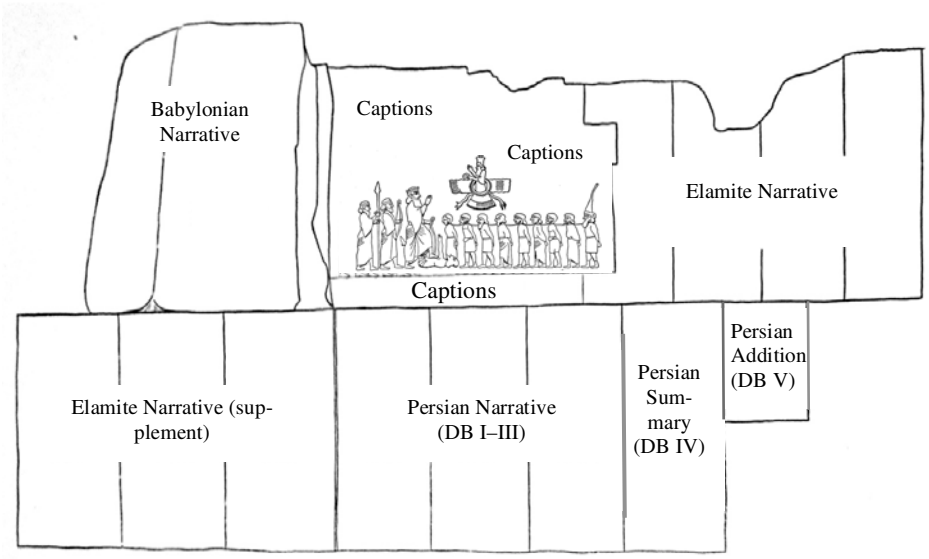

Figure 3.9. The Behistun monument with relief and trilingual inscriptions. After King and Thompson, *The Sculptures and Inscriptions of Darius*, pl. VI; corrected by Borger, *Die Chronologie des Darius-Denkmals am Behistun-Felsen*, fig. 2. Image adapted from fig. 3.1 by author.

cursory glance at the Behistun relief reveals that this monument reflects a heterogeneous field of representational practices. The Behistun relief could readily be considered an "imagetext." The main texts (DB), which are arranged in columns and organized to the left (Babylonian), right (Elamite), bottom center (Persian), and bottom left (Elamite supplement) of the relief, provide lengthy narrative histories of Darius's lineage and rise to power (522–521 B.C.E.) after the death of Cambyses II. Rather than illustrate any one of the events described in the main portion of the narrative histories (DB I–III), the accompanying image functions as a type of "visual précis" that illuminates the text by compressing discrete episodes into one visual tableau.[138] In other words, the image on the relief is best understood not as a snapshot of a particular historical moment or as a straightforward illustration of a specific section of the written text. Rather, the image functions as a conceptual summary of the key events in the underlying message of Darius' rise to power.[139]

King and Kingship, 186–92; and Cindy Nimchuk, "Darius and the Formation of the Achaemenid Empire: Communicating the Creation of an Empire" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2001), 10–40.

[138] Root, *The King and Kingship*, 187.

[139] Neither did this one scene ever take place in history (ibid., 187–88).

Yet, it should be noted that the image does appear to parallel more closely another textual element on the monument: the short narrative summary (DB IV) that appears in Persian to the bottom right of the sculptured panel. Like the image itself, this section of text summarizes the historical narrative, providing a type of snapshot of the political message of DB I–III: Darius, with the help of Ahuramazda, overthrew the usurper Gaumata and subdued various rebellions throughout the land, bringing peace and stability to the empire.[140]

Yet despite the relative congruence between the image and the narrative summary, differences between image and text still obtain. The summary text describes the rival claimants according to a geographical scheme.[141] The image, in contrast, arranges the rebel captives in the chronological order in which they were subdued.142 Thus, while the relief and DB IV might both function as a type of précis of the main text, they nevertheless tell the story of Darius's rise to power in slightly different ways.

A third type of interaction is evident in the relationship between the image and the short, caption-like inscriptions (DBa-k) that appear in the immediate vicinity of specific figures in the relief. For the most part, these captions have an indexical function in that they primarily identify the name of the figures next to which they appear. All of the characters but Ahuramazda and the two attendants are identified by these shorter inscriptions. The caption that accompanies Darius (DBa) is the most extensive and appears only in Persian and Elamite. Gaumata, the figure under Darius' foot, is identified with a trilingual caption (DBb) at the bottom of the relief. Each of the bound captives are accompanied by a caption (DBc-k); the Persian and Elamite appear above the figure while the Babylonian appears below. The sole exception is the last figure, where no Babylonian text exists.[143]

In its own right, the iconography also attempts to identify the figures according to easily identifiable features—unique dress, facial features,

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[140] Root, *King and Kingship*, 187. For the full translation of DB IV, see Schmitt, *The Bisitun Inscription of Darius the Great*.

[141] Root, *The King and Kingship*, 191. See Arno Poebel, "Chronology of Darius' First Year of Reign," *AJSL* 55 (1938): 149, 150 n. 13, 143; Richard Hallock, "The 'One Year' of Darius I," *JNES* 19 (1960): 36; Windfuhr, "Saith Darius," 271; James Bowick, "Characters in Stone: Royal Ideology and Yehudite Identity in the Behistun Inscription and the Book of Haggai," in *Community Identity in Judean Historiography: Biblical and Comparative Perspectives* (ed. Gary N. Knoppers and Kenneth A. Ristau; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 98.

[142] Root, *The King and Kingship*, 191; Poebel, "Darius' First Year," 162. The ninth figure, Skunkha the Scythian, was added later and reflects Darius's defeat of a subsequent rebellion (519 B.C.E.). This episode is described in the Persian Addition (DB V). When this figure was added to the relief, it protruded into the left-most column of the Elamite narrative. As a result, an Elamite narrative supplement was added to the bottom left of the image.

[143] See Nimchuk, "Creation of an Empire," 12.

beard, and hair.[144] Nevertheless, there are important differences. For one, the captions identify figures who, in the main narrative, are not just taken captive but are impaled, mutilated, and killed. The image, however, does not display an explicit sense of violence—or at least, it shows the results of violence (the subjugation of Darius' rivals) not the act of violence.[145] In fact, the captives almost maintain a sense of dignity insofar as they walk upright, only slightly bent at the waist. Second, by identifying these historical figures, the captions transform a timeless, symbolic scene of the victorious king into a more historical narrative about a specific ruler (Darius) and certain victories (the subjugation of nine rebels).[146] Thus, even here, the interaction between visual and verbal data is complex and seems to hint at the type of dialectical tension that Mitchell claims is characteristic of the image-text relationship more broadly.

At a second level, Mitchell's image-text dialectic underscores how textuality enters into the iconography and, conversely, how visuality enters into the inscriptions. On the one hand, the compositional arrangement of the image displays a certain type of "textual syntax." If the image is read from left to right and from top to bottom as a type of visual sentence, it follows the Subject-Object-Verb word order that is common to each of the three languages on the monument: The subject (Darius), appears close to the left edge of the image, the object (the nine rebel captives) appear to the right, and the verb (to defeat or subdue) is visually depicted in the bottom register where Gaumata lies prone, begging for mercy, under Darius's foot.[147] To press the issue further, it is also possible to say that the subject is fronted with a dependent clause—the attendants to the left and Ahuramazda above are the means by which Darius carries out his triumph.[148] In this sense, the image reflects a certain degree of textuality, or at least it "reads" much like a typical sentence in written Persian, Elamite, or Babylonian.

On the other hand, the placement of the written captions also seems to play a significant role in the visual display of the relief. Apart from the information they contain, the placement of these inscriptions within the visual frame of the paneled sculpture functions to direct the gaze of the viewer, to anchor visual attention on the most important figures in the image.[149]

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[144] Nimchuk, "Creation of an Empire," 12; Root, *The King and Kingship*, 193–94.

[145] Nimchuk, "Creation of an Empire," 14.

[146] Ibid., 36.

[147] Ibid., 24. In addition, it might be said that in the picture, the object and verb are morphed together visually, yielding a syntax of subject → object/verb. This observation might reiterate the point that rebels and usurpers will always be subjugated by the righteous king.

[148] The resulting sentence would read something like this: With the aid of my forces and under the protection of Ahuramazda, I, Darius the King, these nine rebels defeated.

[149] Ibid., 25. A more extensive discussion about the relationship between Neo-Assyrian inscribed captions and wall reliefs is taken up by John Malcolm Russell, *Sennacherib's Palace Without Rival at Nineveh* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); and Pamela

That is, the captions indicate whom to look at, or more generally, how to look at the relief itself. Thus, these texts signify not only through the written code of their language but also through the visual code of their physical placement within the frame of the relief. Put simply, what these captions *show* is just as important as what they *tell*.

3.4.2. The Behistun Relief as a Metapicture

Mitchell's theories about the image-text relationship might also prompt one to think about the Behistun relief as a type of metapicture. That is, what might this ancient monumental relief suggest about the nature of the image-text relationship in the ancient Near Eastern world more broadly? Several possibilities obtain.

First, this relief reinforces the idea introduced in chapter 2 of this study that image and text function as complementary languages of communication throughout the ancient Near Eastern world. In the Behistun relief, both image and text function to express Darius' rhetorically crafted message concerning his rise to power and rightful claim to the throne. Both word and image, then, are instruments of Darius' royal propaganda. Reasoning in a similar fashion, Cindy Nimchuk speaks of the iconography of the Behistun relief as a "fourth language" the accompanies the trilingual inscriptions.[150] To be sure, the language of the art tells a slightly different version of the story than the inscriptions (see §3.4.1). Yet, the same might be said, though perhaps to a lesser degree, of the Elamite, Persian, and Babylonian languages, too. After all, any translation involves interpretation. In either case, as a metapicture the Behistun relief captures in a single visual frame the reality that visual and verbal languages co-existed in the ancient world and were both used as a means of expressing and transmitting knowledge to particular audiences.

Second, the Behistun relief might be conceived of as a metapicture in the manner of Magritte's *La trahison des images.* In both cases, the juxtaposition of visual and verbal data in a single visual frame initially seems to invite an understanding of the image as a literalistic illustration of the text or, conversely, the text as a straightforward caption for the image. However as already discussed, while the image and text on the Behistun relief are clearly related, no amount of description in the main text adds up to the iconographic depiction in the relief itself. While the fissure between image and text in this relief is surely not as extreme as it is in Magritte's *La trahison des images*, the Behistun relief nevertheless bears witness to the in-

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Gerardi, "Epigraphs and Assyrian Palace Reliefs: The Development of the Epigraphic Text," *JCS* 40 (1988): 1–35.

[150] Nimchuk, "The Creation of an Empire," 7.

commensurability of discourse and display, even within the same object. Thus as a metapicture the Behistun relief, not unlike Magritte's *La trahison des images*, calls the reader to return to the scene, to look again at the text and the art, and to consider the nature of their interaction. In other words, both Magritte's painting and Darius' relief can be seen as prompting reflection on the image-text relationship in their respective contexts.

Third, the Behistun relief might function as a metapicture of the role of texts in a society that was highly illiterate. This observation emerges from the physical location of the relief itself. The inscriptions and iconography are located high up on a cliff at Mount Behistun, some 500 feet above the plain where a main caravan route passed. The caravan route would have been the most natural vantage for seeing the relief, though it would also have been possible to traverse a small hill to the base of the mountain upon which the relief was located. Even in this case, however, an ancient observer would have been some 300 feet from the relief. As a result, both the captions and the trilingual inscriptions would have been visible to the ancient observer but certainly not legible. While the observer would have been able to see that the relief contain inscriptions, they would not have been able to make out the individual graphemes of the respective languages.

Much of the same might be said about textual materials more generally in the ancient Near East. In light of extremely low literacy rates in the ancient world (cf. §2.2), it is very likely that when the general populace encountered texts, whether on public monuments, administrative records, or inscribed seals, they would not have been able to read them—that is, for the vast majority of people, texts would have been visible but illegible. Thus, what makes the written material on the Behistun relief illegible is not only its placement 300 feet above the nearest vantage point but also the fact that most viewers would have been unable to read (let alone understand) the cuneiform even if they could get near enough to see individual graphemes. Thus, one conclusion that can be drawn from seeing the Behistun relief as a metapicture is that textual materials most likely played an important role in ancient visual culture insofar as they, like images, were *visual* objects designed to be seen, looked at, and gazed upon, even if their linguistic content could not be read by most observers.

3.4.3. Implications

The above analysis indicates several ways in which Mitchell's work on the image-text relationship might come to bear on the study of a specific work of ancient art (namely, the Behistun relief) that combines visual and textual representation. More broadly speaking, the following implications should be noted about integrating contemporary theories about the image-text relationship and the study of ancient visual and textual materials.

First, that the image-text relationship has garnered so much attention in recent contributions to visual culture studies should offer a corrective to research on ancient artifacts that is disproportionately concerned with textual evidence. The image-text relationship is not, after all, a unique characteristic of the contemporary world. Visual and verbal data are combined in a number of ways in antiquity, be it in the form of seals and coins with both epigraphic and iconographic elements, wall reliefs and their accompanying inscriptions, hieroglyphic tomb paintings, or other mixed-media artifacts. Thus, even if the specific details of Mitchell's theories are not taken up by biblical scholars or historians of ancient art, the overall trajectory of his work should prompt scholars interested in ancient images and texts to consider more explicitly the nature and effects of visual-verbal interactions.

Second, Mitchell's theories offer a robust conceptual framework for describing the complex relationship between images and texts. While the goal need not be to reproduce Mitchell's web of terminology (e.g., imagetext, image-text dialectic, metapicture, hypericon, pictorial texts, textual pictures, etc.), research on image and art in antiquity would do well to move away from the simple binaries of "images-as-text" and "image-versus-text." Mitchell's theories reveal that the image-text relationship is more complicated and that most media is far more "mixed" than is often presumed. In this sense, contemporary visual theory offers a valuable heuristic framework for biblical studies insofar as it helps name and describe complexities in the nature of ancient art, text, and their interaction.

Third, the application of contemporary visual theory to the study of ancient images and texts also has the potential to foster mutually beneficial inter-disciplinary conversations. On the one hand, this endeavor would prompt visual culture theorists to expand their research beyond contemporary art and nonart objects to include images (and texts) from a more diverse historical horizon. On the other hand, it would also give scholars interested in ancient iconography access to more theoretically refined tools of analysis. By linking contemporary theory to ancient art, scholars in both fields of study would be challenged to raise new questions about their disciplines and pursue new ways of talking about the image-text relationship.

3.5. Drawing Conclusions about the Iconographic Method

By way of conclusion, in this final section I offer several ways in which Mitchell's theories contribute to a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies. Specifically, how might notions about the image-text dialectic and the metapicture further refine how biblical scholars approach issues pertaining to image-text congruence, correlation, and contiguity? Two specific points of application should be noted.

First, what difference would it make to take up Mitchell's ideas about the metapicture, and specifically the type of metapicture that comments on or refers to the interaction of visual and verbal representation, within biblical research? As Mitchell himself has noted, the sort of referentiality on display in metapictures is not an intrinsic property of select images. Rather, every image, at least to some degree, combines visual and verbal data and thus could potentially be used for talking about the nature of the image-text relationship more broadly. In this sense, utilizing a metapicture is part of an interpretive strategy that would enable biblical scholars to anchor their discussions about the relationship between ancient art and the Bible to an analysis of artifacts that combine image and text in explicit ways.

As an example of how the metapicture might be employed in biblical research, it will be instructive to return to the previous discussion about LeMon's critique of Brown's iconographic method (§3.2.3). It was noted that while LeMon critiques Brown for not closely attending to questions of cultural particularity, LeMon fails to acknowledge explicitly the ways in which he and Brown pursue different types of comparative approaches. LeMon, strictly speaking, focuses on contiguous images and texts whereas Brown is more open to comparing non-contiguous data. However, "agreeing to disagree" about contiguous and non-contiguous comparisons in iconographic exegesis is not the only way of brokering a peaceful settlement between LeMon's and Brown's studies. In this regard, the metapicture might provide a new way forward.

At the outset of his study, Brown seems to reason that what Jan Assmann says about Egyptian New Kingdom solar hymns—that "image and text are equivalent"—also holds true for the relationship between ANE art and the Psalms.[151] Brown essentially uses New Kingdom solar hymns as a type of metapicture for understanding the image-text relationship in iconographic exegesis. While there is an organic union between image and text in these Egyptian hymns,[152] LeMon is right to note that the same cannot be said of the relationship between ANE iconography and the Psalms:

> Unlike Egyptian hieroglyphs, the alphabetic script of even the oldest manuscripts of the Psalms is far removed from any ideographic sense. And, obviously, no pictures (i.e., illustrations) accompany the Psalms. So when Brown adopts Assmann's terminology to speak of "iconic metaphors" and claims that ancient Near Eastern images and biblical texts mutually refer to a single "thought" or "content" lying outside both image and text, Brown has not dealt adequately with the issue of cultural particularity.[153]

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[151] Assmann, *Egyptian Solar Religion*, 65. For the related discussion in Brown, see *Seeing the Psalms*, 5.

[152] Not only are hieroglyphic signs pictographic in nature but also painted images in reliefs can often function as hieroglyphic determinatives writ large.

[153] LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 21

While LeMon's critique is certainly well directed, it would perhaps be better to conclude that the underlying problem is not *just* about cultural particularity but also about the type of metapicture Brown relies upon. The image-text relationship in Egyptian solar hymns reflects a different set of visual-verbal interactions than is evident between, say, images of the winged sun disk and solar language used for Yahweh in the Psalms.

Yet, for his own part, LeMon does not provide an alternative metapicture to guide his iconographic method. Rather, his solution to the problem he sees in Brown's work involves advocating a methodological approach that pays more careful attention to both the chronological and geographic context of the artifacts at hand.[154] Thus, while LeMon's research is far more attentive to questions of historical context, he does not base his broader reflections on the image-text relationship on a particular metapicture from the ancient world. Thus, in the end, neither Brown nor LeMon attempt to address what I think is a critical methodological question: What are suitable metapictures for iconographic exegesis? While there is certainly no one answer to this question (i.e., a meta-metapicture), it seems to be a question worth asking. Anchoring reflections on the relationship between ancient art and the Bible in actual objects that combine image and text, such as the Behistun relief (§3.4), would be productive for at least two reasons.

For one, a consideration of metapictures would help discussions about the image-text relationship to become more concrete. That is to say, analyzing the diverse ways in which visual and verbal data interact with one another in an object such as the Behistun relief would offer a heuristic guide for thinking through how ancient viewers might have construed the relationship between other ANE images and texts. Although there is no guarantee that the image-text relationship on display in the Behistun relief is a reliable indicator of how Israelites in, say, the Persian period (or at any other time) would have understood the relationship between the Hebrew Bible and Achaemenid (or any other) iconography, it would provide a contextually-specific point of reference, or at least a set of evocative object lessons, that then could be employed in iconographic exegesis.

For instance, LeMon argues that there is not a one-to-one relationship between literary imagery of Yahweh's winged form and any single iconographic motif in Syro-Palestinian art. Rather, each literary context draws on and even blends together a unique constellation of iconographic motifs. This important point potentially could be strengthened by noting that even in ANE artifacts that combine image and text in the same visual frame, the relationship between the two media is rarely if ever a matter of one-to-one congruence or straightforward illustration. Not unlike the imagery in the Psalter, the main text in the Behistun relief also displays a certain type of

[154] LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 21.

"multistability" insofar as it draws on a set of ideas that cannot be captured by any single image, let alone the image on the relief itself. As a result, if, as LeMon suggests, "the employment of the multistable image of Yahweh's wings reveals the psalmist's fascination with this mysterious divine image," then it also might be said to reveal the psalmist's familiarity with the nature of visual-verbal interactions in his own historical context. In other words, the ambiguity of referentially that LeMon discovers with respect to Yahweh's winged form in the Psalter is also true, if not generally at least in specific cases, about other visual-verbal interactions in the ancient world.

Conversely, in studies such as Brown's identifying a metapicture would introduce a third element to the comparison that might function as a type of historical relay between what are non-contiguous images and texts. Instead of describing the image-text relationship in somewhat vague analogical terms ("so also in the psalms"), a sustained analysis of a metapicture would enable Brown to speak in more specific ways about how images and texts relate to one another, even if these are not from the same chronological or geographical context. While the idea of a metapicture would not dissolve what are very real methodological differences between contiguous and non-contiguous comparisons in iconographic exegesis, it could help further clarify the goals and starting points of each approach.

Second, Mitchell's theories about the image-text dialectic may also make several important contributions to how biblical scholars think about the issue of image-text congruence. Mitchell's dialectic would caution against an easy accommodation of visual and verbal data, and in doing so, it would remind biblical scholars that any image-text relationship is characterized by a tension of similarity *and* difference. While recent contributions to iconographic exegesis have been able to talk about and analyze similarities between ANE images and biblical texts with increasing precision and contextualization, they have seldom given the same careful attention to points of difference. A possible exception is LeMon's previously mentioned study of Yahweh's winged forms in the book of Psalms. LeMon acknowledges that "no single iconographic trope provides the key to interpreting the images of Yahweh's wings."[155] Instead, each image reflects a certain type of multistability insofar as it draws on and combines various iconographic motifs. To put the matter in Mitchell's terms, no single image shows exactly what a given psalm says.

Yet, one might press this point further. As already noted, LeMon suggests that the literary imagery of Yahweh's winged form in the Psalter exhibits a certain degree of "multistability." LeMon borrows this terminology from none other than Mitchell himself, who uses this concept to refer to the co-existence of different images in the same gestalt, such as in the "duck-

[155] LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 190.

rabbit" referenced earlier in this chapter.[156] For LeMon, the most salient feature of Mitchell's discussion of this issue is the "secondary effect" of multistability—that is, its ability to invite "the spectator to return with fascination to the mysterious object."[157] However, within Mitchell's visual theory, the notion of multistability is intimately connected to his theory of the image-text dialectic. Mitchell contends that the ambiguity on display in a multistable image is, in the words of Walter Benjamin, "the pictorial image of dialectics, the law of dialects seen at a standstill."[158]

As a result, whatever secondary effect the multistable image might have, its *primary* effect is to highlight the dialectical tension between difference and similarity, ekphrastic hope and ekphrastic fear.[159] Thus, while I agree with LeMon that the multistability of the imagery in the Psalter is "what makes the literary picture so compelling," it also is what makes it so difficult to tie down, so resistant to any straightforward account of image-text congruence or correlation.

Thus construed, Mitchell's notion of multistability might have greater purchase in iconographic exegesis than LeMon's brief analysis would seem to suggest. On the one hand, Mitchell's theory prompts biblical scholars to recognize that multistability is not the unique characteristic of a particular set of images and texts, but rather is, as Mitchell contends, "constitutive of representation as such."[160] In other words, when studying a given text in the Bible in light of ancient art, biblical scholars should be attentive not only to *ambiguity* in the relationship, but also to *multiplicity*—that is, the way in which literary imagery typically draws on and combines multiple iconographic motifs. As such, the proper subject of iconographic exegesis is not the image-text relationship as much as it is a network of image-text relationships. On the other hand, Mitchell's dialectic reminds us that the Bible—or any other text—never simply "employs" or "adopts" visual imagery, but rather "redeploys" and "adapts" it for the purposes of written discourse. To say that biblical texts redeploy or adapt iconographic motifs is not to deny the presence of image-text congruence. Rather, it simply acknowledges that one of the implications of Mitchell's image-text dialectic is that images are often repurposed or "revisioned" in order to meet the needs of new theological contexts.[161]

What this final section hopefully makes clear is that the image-text relationship in iconographic exegesis involves more than just identifying similar themes in certain images and texts or juxtaposing visual and verbal data

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[156] In fact, multistability is a specific characteristic of a certain type of metapicture. See Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 45–57.

[157] LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 192.

[158] Ibid., 45.

[159] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 56.

[160] Ibid., 5.

[161] I will return to this specific issue in more detail in chapter 6 of this study.

that share the same subject matter. Rather, examining the image-text relationship entails a careful consideration of a variety of methodological issues (e.g., congruence, correlation, and contiguity) and might be informed by numerous theoretical frameworks. Yet, as important as it is to better understand the image-text relationship from both methodological and theoretical vantage points, this is not the only relationship that should matter to those interested in utilizing ancient art in the study of biblical literature. It is also important to consider the relationship that obtains between images and their viewers. How did ancient viewers come to understand visual materials and what can we infer from the ways in which viewers talked about or treated art objects? These two issues—visual analysis and visual response—are addressed in the next two chapters of this study, respectively.

Chapter 4

Picturing Representation: Images, Meaning, and Visual Analysis

"Pictures in perspective, like any others, have to be read;
and the ability to read has to be acquired."[1]

"In order to correctly use and evaluate a pictorial source in historical terms, the modern interpreter not only has to learn the pictorial 'language' of images . . . but also to inquire into the rules which governed their commissioning, production, and display in antiquity."[2]

4.1. The Aims and Limits of the Iconographic Method

Iconographic exegesis is predicated on the notion that images, much like texts, function as a type of language. Being able to understand what images are "saying" is contingent on (visual) language acquisition, or as Nelson Goodman puts it, the ability to "read" pictures. It is often suggested that in comparison to texts, determining the precise meaning of images is more problematic, and perhaps even near impossible. This view, interestingly enough, is held by text-focused and image-focused scholars alike. Literary theorist Roland Barthes, for instance, suggests that images display a certain "resistance to meaning" insofar as their underlying messages and connotations are open to a wide variety of interpretations.[3] Reasoning along a similar line, art historian Margaret Miles contends that determining the meaning of images is open to considerable ambiguity, and, unlike texts, they neither yield "precise information" nor a "detachable conclusion."[4] In fact, while

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[1] Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), 14.

[2] Christoph Uehlinger, "Clio in a World of Pictures: Another Look at the Lachish Reliefs from Sennacherib's Southwest Palace at Nineveh," in *Like a Bird in a Cage: The Invasion of Sennacherib in 701 BCE* (ed. Lester L. Grabbe; JSOTSup 363; ESHM 4; New York: Sheffield Academic, 2003), 224–25.

[3] Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (trans. Stephen Heath; New York: Hill and Wang; 1977), 32.

[4] Margaret R. Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1985), 30, 33.

Miles believes that visual data is an essential primary resource when it comes to studying the history of Christianity—a provocative and important insight in its own right—she asserts that "the multivalence of an image means that we can *never definitely interpret it*."[5]

One need not fully agree with either Barthes' or Miles' doubts about the indeterminacy of visual meaning to appreciate their underlying point: being able to read images requires critical reflection on the methods of analysis that one employs. This very point is underscored by Christoph Uehlinger, who, in commenting on the role of images religio-historical research, notes the following: "In order to correctly use and evaluate a pictorial source in historical terms, the modern interpreter not only has to learn the pictorial 'language' of images . . . but also to inquire into the rules which governed their commissioning, production, and display in antiquity."[6]

What methods, then, might guide such an inquiry into the meaning of images? While no single approach is universally employed, a method of analysis known as the iconography has traditionally been utilized in the study of ancient and premodern art.[7] As a method of visual analysis, iconography is expressly interested in identifying or describing the subject matter of an image as opposed to its formal composition or stylistic features.[8]

While the historical roots of the iconographic method reach back into the nineteenth century, it is most widely associated with Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968).[9] In his classic 1939 *Studies in Iconology*, Panofsky pioneers a methodological approach that seeks to elucidate three levels of meaning in an image, each determined through a different analytical operation:

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[5] Miles, *Image as Insight*, 32; emphasis mine.

[6] Uehlinger, "Clio in a World of Pictures," 224–25.

[7] The iconographic method is, on occasion, employed in the analysis of contemporary art or even nonart objects. In describing analytical approaches in visual culture studies, James Elkins notes that "the method that does the most interpretive work is typically a very conservative kind of iconography derived from Panofsky" (*Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* [New York: Routledge, 2003], 105). Thus, despite their interest in considerably different "canons" of art, scholars of visual culture and ancient Near Eastern art history often utilize similar methods of visual interpretation.

[8] See, for instance, Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1972 [1939]), 3.

[9] Many early contributions to the field of iconography in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were focused on Christian religious art. See, for instance, Adolphe Napoléon Didron, *Christian Iconography: The History of Christian Art in the Middle Ages* (trans. E. J. Millington; 2 vols.; New York: F. Ungar, 1965 [French original: 1843]; Émile Mâle, *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century* (trans. from 3d ed. by Dora Nussey; New York: Harper, 1958 [1899]; idem., *Religious Art in France, The Thirteenth Century: A Study of Medieval Iconography and Its Sources* (Bollingen Series 90/2; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984 [1908]); and Anton Springer, *Die Baukunst des christlichen Mittelalters: Ein Leitfaden* (Bonn: Henry & Cohen, 1854).

Level of interpretation	Object of interpretation	Instrument of interpretation	Corrective principle of interpretation
pre-iconographic *description*	primary or natural subject matter (forms and motifs)	recognition of forms through practical experience	history of style (how forms and motifs are expressed)
iconographic *analysis*	secondary or conventional subject matter (themes and concepts)	knowledge of themes through literary sources	history of types (how themes or concepts are expressed)
iconological (or iconographic) *interpretation*	intrinsic content and symbolic value	understanding of meaning through culturally conditional principles	history of symbols (how "the essential tendencies of the human mind" are expressed)

Figure 4.1. Summary of Panofsky's iconographic method. Adapted by the author from Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, 14–15.

(1) At the "pre-iconographic" level, one draws on practical experience in order to *describe* the primary or natural subject matter as expressed in certain forms and motifs; (2) At the "iconographic" level, one utilizes knowledge gleaned from literary sources to *analyze* the secondary or conventional subject matter which is articulated through specific pictorial themes or concepts; and (3) At the "iconological" level, one applies an understanding of culturally conditioned concepts in order to *interpret* the symbolic meaning(s) communicated by a given image. For each of Panofsky's three levels of meaning, he identifies a corrective principle that guides analysis in light of knowledge about the history of style, types, and symbols, respectively. Panofsky's schema of interpretation is summarized in the following chart (**fig. 4.1**).

It should be noted that in the third level, Panofsky distinguishes between *iconography*, which refers to the identification of content, and *iconology*, which refers to the underlying principles or socio-religious movements that give rise to the image's intrinsic meaning. The relationship between iconography and iconology might be understood as being similar to that of geography and geology—that is, an external phenomenon and the underlying processes that bring it about.[10] In fact, later scholars occasionally subdivide Panofsky's third level into both "iconographic interpretation" (the deeper meaning expressed by the image) and "iconological interpretation" (why

[10] Othmar Keel, "Iconography and the Bible," *ABD* 3:358.

this image was created just so).[11] In this case, iconology is a phase or level of investigation within the broader method of iconography. More typically, however, this distinction in terminology is not retained and the term iconography is utilized as a description of both the overall method and each of its three stages.[12]

Although Panofsky is particularly focused on analyzing visual materials, cultural historian Peter Burke contends that his method applies what is "a distinctly German tradition of interpreting *texts*" to the interpretation of images.[13] Nearly a century before the publication of Panofksy's *Studies in Iconology*, the German philologist Georg Anton Friedrich Ast (1778–1841) had pioneered a hermeneutical method that sought to distinguish three levels of meaning in literature: the grammatical, the historical, and the cultural. A similar approach to meaning was taken up by Panofsky's predecessors, including the early-twentieth-century art historians associated with the Warburg School at Hamburg and the Vienna School.[14]

Under the influences of these scholars, Panofsky's method came to reflect a type of "philological" approach to meaning in the visual arts. Panofsky, in fact, was trained in historical linguistics and viewed himself as much as a philologist as an art historian.[15] Believing that philology was the foundation for all humanistic inquiry, Panofsky developed a method of visual analysis that effectively bracketed out issues pertaining to aesthetics, formal composition, function, ideology, and the viewer's response. As such, the iconographic method tends to reduce a work of art to a collection of signs that express a one-to-one relationship between the subject matter and a specific message or idea intended by the original producer. The principal aim, then, of the iconographic method is to read a painting as a text, to

[11] Roelof van Straten, *An Introduction to Iconography: Symbols, Allusions, and Meaning in the Visual Arts* (trans. Patricia de Man; rev. Eng. ed.; Documenting the Image 1; Yverden: Gordon and Breach, 1994 [1985]), 3–24.

[12] This general preference for the term iconography over iconology is perhaps due to some sense that *graphein* (writing) is more suitable than *logos* (speech, discourse) when it comes to analyzing the *eikon* (image).

[13] Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Picturing History Series; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 36; emphasis mine. ANE art historian Zainab Bahrani offers a similar observation when she comments that Panofsky's method operates "according to a linguistic rationality" (*Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia* [New York: Routledge, 2001], 131). For further discussion, see §4.2 below.

[14] Burke, *Eyewitnessing*, 35. For a discussion of the Vienna School and its art historical methods, see Christopher S. Wood, ed., *The Vienna School Reader: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s* (New York: Zone Books, 2000). See also Aloïs Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry* (trans. with foreword and annotations by Rolf Winkes; Series Archaeologica 36; Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider, 1985 [1901]).

[15] Dieter Wuttke, *Erwin Panofsky: Korrespondenz 1910 bis 1968* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003), 434.

identify its vocabulary (forms and motifs), to parse its structure (themes and concepts), and to uncover the etymological roots of its culturally conditioned meaning (symbolic value). In sum, iconography offers a putative science of images (*Kunstwissenschaft*) in which, as W. J. T. Mitchell puts it, "the 'icon' is thoroughly absorbed by [a concern for] the 'logos.'"[16]

Understood in this way, it is perhaps not surprising that iconography has become the method of choice for visual analysis in traditionally text-based fields such as biblical studies. For those biblical scholars interested in ancient art, Panofsky's method not only offers a way of interpreting images that is familiar to how they already work with texts but it also seeks to uncover the sort of information—that is, subject matter and intrinsic historical or symbolic content—that they are most eager to glean from visual sources. As a result, Panofsky's method has been widely appropriated in and beyond the Fribourg School and often features prominently in discussions about approaches to iconographic exegesis.[17] For instance, while Izaak J. de Hulster acknowledges that pictures can be studied in a variety of different ways, he contends that Panofsky's method "remains the most important starting point for methodological reflections" in iconographic exegesis.[18] In a similar manner, Brent A. Strawn admits that the study of meaning in the visual arts is "a vast area," but in his own work he underscores the way in which Panofsky "has proven foundational for subsequent thinking" in the study of ancient Near Eastern art.[19]

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[16] W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 28.

[17] This is especially evident in Annette Weissenrieder and Friederike Wendt's essay, "Images as Communication: The Methods of Iconography," in *Picturing the New Testament: Studies in Ancient Visual Images* (ed. Annette Weissenrieder, Friederike Wendt, and Petra von Gemünden; WUNT 193; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 1–49. They begin their survey of methods of image analysis with a review of Panofsky's work, noting that he "presented a method of unpacking and interpreting images which has resonated with many in the art sciences and which promoted a continuing discourse" (10).

[18] Izaak J. de Hulster, *Iconographic Exegesis and Third Isaiah* (FAT 2/36; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 70. Though de Hulster draws on other contributions to image analysis, his method of "researching images" essentially follows Panofsky's three levels of meaning.

[19] Brent A. Strawn, "Imagery," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings* (ed. Tremper Longman and Peter Enns; Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008), 309. It is telling that even when scholars intentionally bracket out discussions about methods of visual analysis from their studies, references to Panofsky can nevertheless be found in the footnotes. See, for instance, Izaak Cornelius, *The Many Faces of the Goddess: The Iconography of the Syro-Palestinian Goddesses Anat, Astarte, Qedeshet, and Asherah c. 1500–1000 BCE* (OBO 204; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 16 n. 50.

Despite its far-reaching influence, certain details about Panofsky's method of image analysis have come under scrutiny.[20] This critique is especially evident in the methodological appendix of Othmar Keel's *Das Recht der Bilder gesehen zu werden*.[21] One of the main issues raised by Keel is that the second level of interpretation in Panofsky's method relies too heavily on texts to inform its analysis. Keel comments: "Richtig aber ist, dass das Methodenschema Panofskys der Komposition, der Syntax nicht das nötige Gewicht gibt und im Anschluss an die Identifizierung der einzelnen 'Vokabeln' gleich nach dem zugrundeliegenden (literarischen) Text sucht."[22] In Keel's estimation, images should be interpreted in light of other images without turning (or at least prior to turning) to texts. Nevertheless, Keel stops short of calling into question the place of iconography as the *de facto* method of image analysis in his own field of study. In fact, Keel's approach to visual analysis is still an iconographic one insofar as its primary aim is to identify the intrinsic content and symbolic meaning of a given image. Even the summary of interpretation that Keel offers (**fig. 4.2**) shares much in common with the schema produced by Panofsky. Thus, while past contributions to iconographic exegesis have offered a critical assessment of *particular aspects* of Panofsky's iconographic method, they have done little to explore *alternative approaches* to visual analysis.[23]

Further complicating the matter of visual analysis—and Panofsky's schema in particular—is the fact that viewers often approach art with very different interpretive goals in view. Biblical scholars and art historians, for instance, typically attempt to read an image in order to answer historical-critical questions about how, why, and for whom it was originally produced. These concerns, which are evident in Uehlinger's comments cited in the epigraph to this chapter, often play a central role in iconographic exegesis and art historical research and, in my estimation, are crucial to the analysis of images, whether ancient or modern.

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[20] Every level of Panofsky's schema has come under scrutiny and several aspects of his method have been reworked. For representative discussions, see Weissenrieder and Wendt, "Images as Communication," 10–12; and de Hulster, *Iconographic Exegesis*, 73–77.

[21] Keel, *Das Recht der Bilder gesehen zu werden: drie Fallstudien zur Methode der Interpretation altorientalischer Bilder* (OBO 122; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 267–73.

[22] Ibid., 269.

[23] A possible exception is the introductory essay of Weissenrieder and Wendt's edited volume, *Picturing the New Testament* (1–49). They review various methods of visual analysis, including iconography, motif analysis, and semiotic approaches. While insightful, they do not go on to elucidate how these approaches might variously come to bear on the methods and practices of iconographic exegesis. Neither does their brief review offer a sustained engagement of visual theory, especially as it pertains to pictorial representation.

Object of interpretation	Main question	Methodological procedure	Control and evaluation
Motif	Which phenomena represent a motif and how do image details relate to the referent?	Motif-criticism, analysis of convention	Technical quality (state of preservation of image, skill of artist, type of technique
Scene	How are individual motifs combined into meaningful units and what is the relationship of those units to the referent?	Theme-criticism, analysis of synchronic and diachronic parallels, composition (size, scale, colors, etc.)	Image quality (original or copy, compositional unity, later additions or multiple artists)
Decoration	How and why are decorations added to motifs and scenes? What is the meaning of an image in its historical context?	Decoration-criticism, analysis of overall decoration, *Sitz im Leben* of image	Decoration quality (feasibility of a certain decoration for a specific location)

Figure 4.2. Summary of Keel's iconographic method. Adapted by the author from Keel, *Das Recht*, 273; cf. Klingbeil, *Yahweh Fighting from Heaven*, 162 table 23.

Nevertheless, other scholars, including those from the fine arts, gender studies, political science, psychology, radiology, marketing research, and so forth, approach images with a different set of interpretive interests in view. These fields tend to be focused not only on questions concerning the production of images (though this often remains important) but also on issues related to the ways in which images signify, including how they are received and responded to by specific viewing communities. While these latter concerns are often thought to have an ambiguous relationship with historical or contextual studies (as is sometimes the case with semiotic approaches), this need not be the case. In fact, the study of visual response, reception, and signification can function as a way of anchoring production-oriented studies to contextual concerns about how specific viewing communities process visual data. In either case, determining what images mean—that is, learning the languages of art—involves more than just understanding, to recall Uehlinger's words from the epigraph above, "the rules which governed their commissioning, production, and display in antiquity." As vital as these questions are, visual analysis also entails a con-

sideration of visual response and reception as well as the rules that govern how images signify.

In shifting attention to issues about visual signification (ch. 4), visual response (ch. 5), and visual reception (ch. 6), I do not mean to suggest that production-oriented concerns should be any less important to methods of visual analysis or even iconographic exegesis more broadly. However, since questions about production have been treated more extensively (and, in my estimation, effectively) in past contributions to iconographic exegesis and art history, the visual hermeneutics offered here attempts to shift attention to questions about images that typically receive less airtime, and as a result, are in need of further scrutiny when it comes to biblical interpretation and religio-historical research.

Therefore, this chapter presents theories about the nature of visual representation that apply pressure to certain aspects of Panofsky's widely-accepted schema. While I do not wish to call into question the overall utility of Panofsky's method, the following reflections challenge the way in which this approach is often applied.[24] First, I explore what assumptions different approaches to visual analysis tend to make about the nature of pictorial signs (§4.2). While the iconographic method often presumes a linguistically oriented understanding of images, I draw upon the visual theory of Nelson Goodman to suggest that images, unlike texts, are best understood to be a type of "dense" or "replete" sign in which every compositional element has the potential to express meaning. Second, I examine how Goodman's theory of pictorial signs can shed light on the meaning of ANE art beyond the level of iconographic content (§4.3). Specifically, I explore three aspects of visual representation—compositional design, rhetoric of display, and the mode of signification—that are not always readily accounted for in the iconographic method, or are primarily treated at the level of Panofsky's pre-iconographic description. In each case, I demonstrate how these aspects of visual representation actively participate in the construction of meaning and thus should be analyzed as an object of interpretation in their own right, not just a "corrective principle." Rather than solely reflecting the interests of contemporary visual theory, I contend that this approach to visual analysis resonates with some of the ways in which ancient Near Eastern viewers customarily looked at and understood pictorial signs. In conclusion, I enumerate several specific ways in which these theo-

[24] On this point, however, a word of caution must be offered. Panofsky's schema was likely never intended to serve as an exhaustive method that could account for every aspect of visual meaning. It seems to have a more limited concern related to iconographic analysis and iconological interpretation. Thus, my remarks in this chapter tend to challenge how Panofsky's method is employed rather than the thoroughness of its original design. Furthermore, my critique involves placing more emphasis on certain aspects of Panofsky's schema (such as the concern for style) than is typically done as opposed to suggesting that Panofsky's approach is misguided in its aims.

retical reflections can further inform a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies (§4.4).

4.2. The Nature of Pictorial Signs

Semiotics (or semiology)[25] refers to the study of signs, especially as it relates to processes of signification and communication.[26] Though often associated with linguistics, semiotics can also be used to study a wide array of representational practices and cultural phenomena.[27] When applied more specifically to the visual arts, semiotic theory analyzes images as a system of signs rather than as a straightforward record of sensory perception. For instance, Charles Sanders Peirce is well known for distinguishing between three types of signs based on the way in which they structure the relationship between the signifier and signified: iconic signs resemble what they signify (e.g., a portrait); indexical signs are linked to what they signify through causal connections or gestures (e.g., smoke is an index of fire); and conventional signs refer to their referent through a culturally conditioned code (e.g., a red octagon traffic sign [even without writing] means "stop"; the symbol ∞ signifies the abstract concept "infinity"). Though Peirce's work continues to be important to scholars interested in visual analysis,[28] more recent contributions to visual theory, including Ernst Gombrich's *Art*

[25] Historically, the term semiology is often associated with a study of linguistic signs and is connected with the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (*Cours de linguistique générale* [ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, with Albert Riedlinger; [Lausanne and Paris: Payot, 1916]; English trans. by Wade Baskin, *Course in General Linguistics* [Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977]). In distinction, the term semiotics tends to be used to refer to the philosophical tradition linked with Charles Sanders Peirce. However, these distinctions are rarely maintained in contemporary discussions. Instead, semiotics has come to be used as a synonym for, or even in place of, semiology.

[26] While the description of semiotics as a "study of signs" is generally accepted, many scholars nuance and/or elaborate the definition of semiotics to reflect the particular interests of their discipline.

[27] Charles Sanders Peirce once argued that "the entire universe is perfused with signs" (*Pragmaticism and Pragmatics* [ed. Charles E. Hartshorne and Paul Weiss; vol. 5 of *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*; Cambridge: Harvard University Press; 1934], 302). To be sure, the analytical scope of semiotic theory is enormous. It would be all but impossible to provide an adequate survey of its principal viewpoints in any single volume, let alone this brief discussion. For a helpful overview, see Winfried Nöth, ed., *Handbook of Semiotics* (Advances in Semiotics; Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1990).

[28] Gillian Rose offers an insightful discussion of how the work of Peirce applies to visual analysis. See Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (3d ed; Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage, 2012), esp. 105–148. Weissenrieder and Wendt also discuss Peirce in their introduction to the methods of iconography ("Images as Communication," 29–30).

and Illusion, Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art*, and Umberto Eco's *A Theory of Semiotics*, have limited or even excluded the role of iconicity as a characteristic of visual signification.[29] What Gombrich, Goodman, Eco, and numerous others have argued (though to varying degrees) is that all images function as a system of communication in which pictorial signs denote things or ideas in the world according to a conventional code.[30]

While contemporary applications of art history and visual culture studies widely pursue semiotic approaches to visual analysis, it is less clear if or how the iconographic method itself reflects similar perspectives.[31] On the one hand, Panofsky neither situates his work within a semiotic tradition nor explicitly adopts its characteristic terminology. This observation has led scholars such as Annette Weissenrieder and Friederike Wendt to conclude that semiotic theory "has yet to find a central place within iconography."[32] To be sure, in appropriating Panofsky's iconographic method, members of the Fribourg School do not explicitly draw on semiotic theory to inform

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[29] Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Bollingen Series 35; A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts 5; New York: Pantheon Books, 1960) offers one of the first serious challenges to the notion of mimeticism in visual signification. Nelson Goodman extends and intensifies Gombrich's critique in *Languages of Art* (1968). In the opening chapter of this volume, Goodman argues that resemblance is neither a necessary nor sufficient conditional for visual signification. Umberto Eco is equally concerned about the problem of iconicity in semiotics (*A Theory of Semiotics* [Advances in Semiotics; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976]).

[30] Goodman sums up the matter well in the opening pages of his *Languages of Art*: "The plain fact is that a picture, to represent an object, must be a symbol for it, stand for it, refer to it; and that no degree of resemblance is sufficient to establish that requisite relationship of reference; almost anything may stand for almost anything else. A picture that represents—like a passage that describes—an object refers to and, more particularly, *denotes* it. Denotation is the core of representation and is independent of resemblance" (5).

[31] A helpful review of the intersection between semiotics and art history can be found in Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson's article, "Semiotics and Art History," *The Art Bulletin* 73 (1991): 174–208. See also Bryson, "Semiology and Visual Interpretation," in *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation* (ed. Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey; New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 61–73. Nevertheless, it is still possible to find some art historians and philosophers who defend mimetic views of art, at least to a certain degree. See, for instance, David Blinder, "The Controversy over Conventionalism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 41 (1983): 253–64; Randal Dipert, "Reflections on Iconicity, Representation, and Resemblance: Peirce's Theory of Signs, Goodman on Resemblance, and Modern Philosophies of Language and Mind," *Synthese* 106 (1996): 373–397; and Michael T. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[32] Weissenrieder and Wendt, "Images as Communication," 28. However, these scholars note that some archaeologists, such as Tonio Hölscher, have attempted to utilize semiotics in their analysis of material culture. See, for instance, Tonio Hölscher, *The Language of Images in Roman Art: Art as a Semantic System in the Roman World* (trans. Anthony Snodgrass and Anne-Marie Künzl-Snodgrass; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

their study of ANE art. On the whole, these scholars seem far more focused on explaining what an image represents rather than on questions about the nature of visual sign systems.

Yet, on the other hand, art historian Giulio Argan once hailed Panofsky as "the Saussure of Art History."[33] While Argan's claim is somewhat overstated, Christine Hasenmueller has shown that it is not completely unwarranted.[34] At several key points, the underlying logic of Panofsky's method reflects semiotic principles. For instance, at the second level of his schema, Panofsky tends to view the image as a type of conventional sign in which systematic associations link the signifier (in the form of artistic motifs) with its signified (in the form of themes or concepts from literary sources).[35] Furthermore, like most semioticians, Panofsky emphasizes that art is fundamentally communicative and that the analysis of visual meaning primarily involves identifying what an image denotes—its conventional subject matter and/or symbolic meaning.[36] Likewise, Keel, Uehlinger, and other biblical scholars who take up Panofsky's method readily acknowledge that ancient images do not directly reflect reality but rather signify through culturally conditioned patterns or "constellations" of artistic motifs.[37] In fact, most biblical scholars believe that ancient images function far more like linguistic determinatives than they do "historical photographs." That is, they represent sociologically and ideologically constructed concepts (e.g., Achaemenid kingship) or classes of objects (e.g., vassal kings paying homage to an overlord) rather than the actual physical likeness of individual people (e.g., the portraiture of Darius the Great) or events (e.g., the subjugation of Jehu).[38] Thus, even as Panofsky's method does not reflect a purely semiotic approach to visual analysis, the general approach of iconography seems to be tinged with certain aspects of semiotic theory.[39]

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[33] Giulio Carlo Argan, "Ideology and Iconology," in *The Language of Images* (ed. W. J. T. Mitchell; trans. Rebecca West; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 17.

[34] Christine Hasenmueller, "Panofsky, Iconography, and Semiotics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 36 (1978): 289–301.

[35] Ibid., 291.

[36] Ibid., 294.

[37] For Keel and Uehlinger, visual sign systems are conventional and thus differ between specific cultural contexts (*GGG*, 7).

[38] In these examples, I mean to refer to the representations of Darius I on the Behistun relief and representations of Jehu on the Black Obelisk.

[39] In her analysis of Panofsky's method, Hasenmueller admits that not every aspect of iconography can be readily translated into semiotic terms. Indeed, there are certain problems with considering Panofsky's method as a semiotic approach to visual analysis. Specifically, it is less clear how (or even if) Panofksy's first (pre-iconographic) and third (iconological) levels of analysis correspond to traditional semiotic concerns with sign functions and sign processes. For instance, at the pre-iconographical level of analysis, art forms are thought to carry "primary" or "natural" meaning, both of which are difficult to assimilate into semiotic theory (Hasenmueller, "Panofsky, Iconography, and Semiotics," 290). Nevertheless, it might

Regardless of how "semiotic" Panofsky's method might be, the relationship between iconography and semiotic theory is in need of further scrutiny. Specifically, what exactly is "Saussurean" about the iconographic method and what assumptions does it make about the nature of images as conventional signs? How might the aims of iconography be further revised in light of theories about the semantic potential of an image's visual features? And in what way does the nature of pictorial signs in the ancient world intersect with, or even anticipate, some of the questions and concerns of contemporary semiotic theory?

4.2.1. A Linguistic Orientation to Visual Analysis

At a conceptual level, linguistics (especially of the Saussurean variety) has often provided an orientating framework for many applications of semiotic theory, including its use in the visual arts. Many of those who acknowledge the conventionality of images, such as Gombrich and Goodman, tend to look to the paradigm of written language as an adequate way of explaining meaning in artistic representation.[40] In this view, images in representational art, much like words in written language, are understood to be a type of linguistic sign that relays a culturally coded message between a sender and receiver. Even a "naturalistic" visual feature such as perspective is regarded as a conventional symbol that can be decoded only when the viewer has been inculcated in a given system of representational practices.

Thus, many contributions to visual semiotics seem to offer what might be called a "linguistic theory" of pictures.[41] This perspective presumes that there is a deep analogy, or even interchangeability, between visual and verbal signs. As such, pictures are treated much like paragraphs: both consist of conventional signs that can be read by a viewer according to an acquired code. Such a view is evident in Roland Barthes' account of semiotics:

> Though working at the outset on non-linguistic substances, semiology is required, sooner or later, to find language (in the ordinary sense of the term) in its path, not only as a model, but also a component. . . . [T]o perceive what a sub-

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be argued that Panofksy's corrective principle of the "history of style" accounts for a type of representational convention that mediates the relationship between artistic forms and experiential knowledge of the world (ibid., 292). The third level (iconology) is even less tied to semiotic theory, though in the most general terms, it shares with semiology a concern for deep meanings and their associated symbol systems (ibid., 297).

[40] Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 56 and 64. See also David Summers, "Real Metaphor: Towards a Definition of the 'Conceptual' Image," in *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation* (ed. Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey; New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 235.

[41] Mitchell, *Iconology*, 64.

> stance signifies is inevitably to fall back on the individuation of language; there is no meaning which is not designated, and the world of signifieds is none other than that of language.[42]

What Barthes's comments make explicit is that linguistics often provides an overarching way of understanding all symbol systems, including pictorial ones.[43] Therefore, what is potentially "Saussurean" about Panofsky's iconographic method is the way in which it tends to treat images as a type of linguistic sign that can be read and analyzed in the same manner as a word or text. By extending this theory to the realm of the visual arts, Panofsky and others exhibit a type of linguistic orientation or textual rationality in their methods of visual analysis.

While this perspective is common, it is not universally accepted. Mitchell derides it for exhibiting a type of "linguistic imperialism" and Eco laments the fact that semiotics has often been "dominated by a dangerous verbocentric dogmatism."[44] Despite Mitchell and Eco's reprisals, the linguistic approach to visual analysis is not without merit. The painting-picture analogy often functions to elevate the visual sign from the realm of "mere" aesthetics, and, as a result, it bestows on images a communicative capacity that the Western intellectual traditional typically reserves for the written word. Furthermore, in acknowledging that conventional signs are everywhere, semiotics makes visual-verbal comparisons both more possible and compelling.[45] Even Mitchell notes that the linguistic orientation to semiotics functions as a type of "promotional strategy for elevating the dignity of all sorts of signs and communicative activities."[46]

There are also advantages to taking up a linguistic understanding of images in the field of biblical studies. The deep analogy between visual and verbal signs provides a metalanguage of discourse in which concepts and terminology from the domain of written texts can be mapped onto the domain of artistic representation. This enables biblical scholars not only to talk about visual interpretation in terms of "reading images" but also to describe ancient viewers' access to the language of art as a type of "literacy" (see ch. 2). In addition, a linguistic orientation to visual analysis also influences the questions biblical scholars ask and the conclusions they draw when interpreting ancient art. As was suggested at the outset of this chapter, iconography can be said to reflect a philological interest in images insofar as its primary goals are to identify the conventional subject matter and to

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[42] Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith; repr. ed.; New York: Hill and Wang, 1977 [1967]), 10–11.

[43] Mitchell, *Iconology*, 55.

[44] Ibid., 56; Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 228.

[45] See chapter 3 of this study for a more detailed discussion of the nature of the image-text relationship.

[46] Mitchell, *Iconology*, 62.

account for its history of development, both morphologically and semantically.

A representative example of this approach to visual analysis is Izak Cornelius' study of the iconography of Syro-Palestinian goddesses.[47] Cornelius's goals are clearly iconographic in that he attempts to differentiate between artistic representations of Anat, Astarte, Qedeshet,[48] and Asherah through a close analysis of the manner in which they are characteristically represented.[49] This endeavor is made difficult by the fact that these deities seem to share overlapping iconographic profiles and because a single deity can be represented in numerous iconographic forms. In addition, a single image (such as **fig. 4.3**) can sometimes be labeled with an inscription that lists multiple goddess names.[50]

Nevertheless, Cornelius seems to presume that ancient viewers would have been able to clearly identify which goddess a specific image represented, and thus he sets out to help modern researchers do the same. Toward this end, Cornelius constructs a provisional typology of goddess imagery that is based on a careful assessment of specific representational features such as posture (standing or seated), accoutrements (crown, weaponry, ankh), physical appearance (hair style, clothing or lack of clothing), and other associated elements (plants, animals, astral symbols). Based on this mode of analysis, Cornelius is able to identify images as one of several ANE goddesses (in the case of **fig. 4.3**, *qdšt = qedešet/qadištu/qadišat*). Cornelius's iconographic analysis generates several important insights that would not be otherwise evident in studies that focus exclusively on textual materials.[51]

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[47] Izak Cornelius, *The Many Faces of the Goddess: The Iconography of the Syro-Palestinian Goddesses Anat, Astarte, Qedeshet, and Asherah c. 1500–1000 BCE.* (OBO 204; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004).

[48] Cornelius's vocalization of the consonants *qdšt* is far from certain. Also possible—and perhaps more likely—are *qadištu* or *qadišat.*

[49] Cornelius admits that his research is more interested in iconography than it is in iconology insofar as it gives greater attention to "that manner in which a concept is characteristically represented" as opposed to its religio-historical significance (ibid., 16).

[50] The accompanying inscription on fig. 4.3 reads "Qedeshet, Astarte, Anat." However, Cornelius interprets this image as Qedeshet based on several visual attributes, including the Hathor-style hairdo, the lotus flower in her right hand, and the crouching lion underfoot (ibid., 96).

[51] Specifically, since there is no textual evidence that Qedeshet existed as an independent deity in Syro-Palestine or Ugarit, some scholars have speculated that *qdš*/*qdš.t* is merely an epithet of El or Asherah. But when visual representations are taken into account, Cornelius is able to conclude that there is a relatively unique iconographic profile for Qedeshet (ibid., 94–99).

Figure 4.3 The Winchester relief. Painted limestone of a naked goddess, likely *qdšt*, probably 12th c. After Cornelius, *The Many Faces of the Goddess*, pl. 5.16; cf. Keel, *Das Recht der Bilder*, Abb. 206.

Yet, Cornelius's application of the iconographic method is not without drawbacks. Three particular problems can be noted. First, Cornelius seems to treat images as a type of linguistic sign. Though both images and texts are culturally coded, important differences obtain between non-linguistic and linguistic sign systems, at least some of which can affect how these materials are interpreted. Second, the iconographic method, at least as it is appropriated by Cornelius, tends to carefully scrutinize only those visual elements that are essential for identifying an image's referent. For instance, Cornelius closely analyzes certain representational features of goddess imagery (e.g., posture, accoutrements, clothing, hair style, etc.) even as he gives little attention to others, such as the size, style, compositional design, and so forth. As a result, Cornelius, like other scholars interested in iconographic exegesis, implicitly characterizes certain visual features as being semiotically uninteresting, or at least as being of interest only as a "corrective principle" at the level of pre-iconographic description. Third, iconographic research tends to place a great deal of emphasis on categorizing images into discrete typologies. Though typologies can offer the researcher helpful classification schema, if too rigidly employed they can also overestimate the extent to which clear differentiation exists between various visual forms within a given set of images. For example, even as Cornelius admits that there is a degree of overlap between iconographic profiles of Syro-Palestinian goddesses, he nonetheless believes that certain images repre-

sent Anat *or* Astarte, Qedeshet *or* Asherah.[52] While this might well be true in certain instances, the iconographic method can potentially overlook the way in which artistic representation entails the blending of motifs and the merging of distinct subject matters into hybrid visual forms.[53] Thus, even as discrete typologies can be helpful for the purposes of contemporary research, they are sometimes motivated by underlying assumptions that are more suited to linguistic sign systems rather than non-linguistic ones.

I contend that each of these three difficulties with the application of the iconographic method is a direct consequence of treating images as a type of linguistic sign. By assuming that images signify in the same way as words, those using the iconographic method tend to focus on what is a somewhat narrow range of meaning in the visual arts. The corrective to this linguistic orientation to visual analysis is *not* to be found in abandoning the notion that images function as a type of language. Nor is to be found in leaving aside semiotic theory for a concern for formal composition and aesthetics. To the contrary, I contend that the iconographic method does not go far enough in incorporating semiotic theory, especially as it relates to the differentiation between how linguistic and non-linguistic media signify.

4.2.2. Nelson Goodman and the Non-Linguistic Sign

Despite its historical and conceptual ties to linguistics, semiotic theory does not necessarily affirm that images should be read in the same way as texts. In fact, Nelson Goodman has attempted to differentiate between linguistic and non-linguistic systems from a semiotic perspective.[54] For instance, in

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[52] It should be noted that Cornelius admits there are points of representational overlap in this typology and cautions against too easily labeling an image with a specific name of a deity (*The Many Faces of the Goddess*, 7). Nevertheless, these points of ambiguity do not lead Cornelius to conclude, as do some other scholars, that the goddesses were blended and merged into one another. For instance, in discussing Anat and Astarte, Cornelius suggests the following: "But even if their iconographies are sometimes similar (even identical), *this does not mean that they were syncretized or identified*" (ibid., 100; emphasis mine).

[53] Yet, it is important to note that the identification of hybrid visual forms logically presupposes the existence of distinct typologies. In other words, hybridity requires a prior assessment of discrete types that are subsequently blended or merged in a specific visual form. Thus, while I contend that methods of visual analysis must attend to hybrid visual forms, doing so necessarily follows after more traditional concerns with image typologies.

[54] The same can be said of James Elkins, who develops a complex classification schema for distinguishing between various forms or "domains" of representation. See, for instance, Elkins, *The Domain of Images* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), esp. Part II. As was discussed in chapter 3 of this study, Mitchell is also highly interested in questions about how images and texts might be classified. See especially his discussion in *Iconology*, 7–52.

Languages of Art Goodman draws a distinction between different types of sign systems in the following way:

> Non-linguistic systems differ from [written] languages, depiction from description, the representational from the verbal, painting from poems, primarily through lack of differentiation—indeed through density (and consequent total absence of articulation)—of the symbol system.[55]

Throughout *Languages of Art*, Goodman develops these notions about "articulation" and "density" as a way of characterizing the difference between linguistic and non-linguistic sign systems, respectively. In Goodman's view, a notational system is considered *articulate* if its signs are both syntactically disjoint and differentiated.[56] These requirements are met by a number of different sign systems, including most numerical, binary, musical, and linguistic notations.[57] However, the concepts of syntactic disjointness and differentiation are perhaps best explained with reference to what might be the simplest articulate sign system: the Roman alphabet.

According to Goodman, a notational system such as the Roman alphabet is considered *disjoint* if different inscriptions of the same sign (in this case, a letter) are syntactically equivalent.[58] As long as a certain inscription of a letter can be distinguished from other letters in the alphabet, it does not matter, semiotically speaking, how that letter is written. Thus, the letter "a" has the same denotative value regardless of its stylistic features:

In this example, the font, style, and size of the various inscriptions of the letter "a" do not have a signifying function in the alphabetic system. Goodman puts it this way: "Having the same shape, size, etc., is neither necessary nor sufficient for two marks to belong to the same letter."[59] While visually distinct, these letters are syntactically disjoint—that is, they constitute interchangeable representations of the same sign. Thus, in the notational sign system of the Roman alphabet the following words have the same denotative meaning, even though their graphic appearance is not identical:

[55] Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 226.

[56] While differentiation and disjointness are closely related concepts, Goodman notes that these syntactical requirements are independent of one another (ibid., 136).

[57] Ibid., 140.

[58] Ibid., 131.

[59] Ibid., 137.

The main point is that in an articulate notational system, only certain representational features of a given sign are deemed necessary and sufficient for properly identifying its referent.

In these notational systems, what is required of the competent reader is to be able to identify the denotative meaning of the different inscriptions of the letter "a" without mistaking them with other letters in the alphabet. The ability to make correct judgments in these matters is inculcated through tradition and habit but, in certain cases, requires careful perception. For instance, it might not be readily apparent if the inscription  represents the letter "d" or "a." Yet, as Goodman points out, what distinguishes a disjoint system from a non-disjoint one "is not how easily correct judgments can be made but what their consequences are."[60]

Consider, for instance, the following sign:

In an articulate system, depending on how the identity of the letter  is deciphered, one arrives at two different denotative outcomes: either "aim" or "dim." Outside of this determination, the visual appearance of this sign (i.e., the font, style, size, etc.) is irrelevant when it comes to identifying its denotative value.

The second feature of an articulate notational system is syntactic *differentiation*. A differentiated symbolic system works by gaps and discontinuities between individual signs, meaning that for any character it is possible to assign one and only one distinct semiotic value.[61] Goodman contends that in the Roman alphabet, "we adopt a policy of admitting no mark as an inscription of a letter unless or until we can decide that the mark belongs to no other letter."[62] In other words, the alphabet is characterized by finite differentiation between its constitutive elements. Differentiation would be violated if there existed some hybrid sign between *a* and *b* (such as *ab*) that represented a semiotically meaningful value within the alphabetic system.[63] In this way, by requiring the reader to assign one and only one value to every discrete sign, a differentiated notational system depends on a classification schema that admits of no composite forms between any of its individual components.

In contrast to the alphabet and other differentiated notations, non-linguistic sign systems are characterized by their *lack* of syntactic articulation. Goodman describes such systems as exhibiting "density"—that is, their signs are both syntactically non-disjoint and infinitely differentiated. Thus, a non-linguistic sign system, such as an artistic representation, is dis-

[60] Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 134.
[61] Ibid., 135–36.
[62] Ibid., 140.
[63] Ibid., 136.

tinct from a linguistic system such as the Roman alphabet in at least two ways: (1) every difference in visual form carries with it the potential to express meaning; and (2) between any two existing marks in the system, there is a potentially continuous field of composite signs that meaningfully conveys information.

Goodman illustrates the differences between a linguistic and non-linguistic sign system using the simple comparison between a graduated and ungraduated thermometer.[64] In the former case, the height of the mercury is assigned a determinate value according to its position with respect to differentiated lines on the graduated scale. Thus, with a graduated thermometer, one reads the mercury in a way much like one reads syntactically differentiated letters in the Roman alphabet. That is, the temperature is *either* 80° *or* 81°, or, depending on how finely graded the scale is, 80.5° *or* 80.6°. Even if the mercury is between two marks on the graduated scale, it is only important from a semiotic perspective to be able to round up or down to the closest determinate reading.

A graduated thermometer can also be said to be disjoint insofar as its appearance—the color of the mercury, the width of the column, or any distinguishing visual feature of the thermometer itself—is semiotically uninteresting apart from being able to identify the position of the mercury with respect to the graduated scale. However, with an ungraduated thermometer, every position on the mercury column has the potential to convey meaningful information about the current temperature. Since there is no scale included to provide finite differentiation, even the smallest variations in the position of the mercury can potentially make a difference in meaning. There is no need to round up or down—every reading is non-disjoint and unique.

To be sure, these characteristics often result in there being a certain degree of ambiguity in terms of ascribing a determinate value to any given position of the mercury in an ungraduated thermometer. In many ways, a reading of an ungraduated thermometer might well sound somewhat impressionistic or vague— "it appears to be rather cold today" or "it must be quite hot outside." Or it might harken back to the concerns Barthes and Miles have about the difficulty of reading images—that is, they do not yield precise information and are open to wide range of interpretations (§4.1).

Nevertheless, dense sign systems are not *inherently* indeterminate, though they do demand greater interpretive competency from their readers. For instance, consider another type of dense sign system: a Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scan. Radiologists spend many years of intense train-

[64] For Goodman's discussion of several different examples of articulate and dense systems, see *Languages of Art*, 154–76. Mitchell provides a helpful summary of Goodman's argument about thermometers in *Iconology*, 67.

ing in order to be able to discern what minute changes in a MRI scan might indicate about a patient's physiological condition.[65] Having an especially high level of competency in reading images, radiologists are able to determine whether or not the slightest shadows or changes in form indicate the presence of cancer nodules. Thus, while the difference in meaning that obtains from slight alterations in the position of the mercury in an ungraduated thermometer may seem rather trivial or indeterminate, in an MRI scan, the smallest variations in visual form can literally be a matter of life and death.

Goodman's distinctions between linguistic and non-linguistic sign systems raises several important implications for how biblical scholars study ancient art.

First, Goodman's explanation of the differences between articulate and dense sign systems should caution biblical scholars against uncritically transferring notions about linguistic signs to the realm of artistic representation. While both visual and verbal signs are conventional, they do not necessarily operate according to the same underlying code. In other words, the problem with the iconographic method is not that it attempts to read images as a type of language but that it assumes that the language of images operates more as an articulate notational system than as a dense one.[66]

This, in fact, seems to be the case with Cornelius' previously mentioned study of Syro-Palestinian goddess imagery. Cornelius approaches images of the goddesses as a type of disjoint notational system: as long as a certain figure can be distinguished from other figures in the iconographic record, it does not matter (semiotically speaking) how a goddess is displayed. Thus, not unlike the font, style, or size of a given inscription of a letter, so long as the goddess depicted can be properly identified, certain visual details, such as whether the goddess is depicted frontally or in profile, her size, the style or mode of display, and so forth, are regarded as semiotically uninteresting.

Similarly, Cornelius's typology seems to assume that goddess imagery is finitely differentiated. As is the case with the Roman alphabet, for every given sign in the system, there is one and only one semiotic value (Anat *or* Astarte *or* Asherah *or* Ishtar) that might be assigned—that is, no composite forms are admitted. Yet, in general, non-linguistic systems consist of a potentially continuous field of signs that regularly entail composite and hybrid

[65] As discussed below, Goodman would likely consider the MRI scan to be a type of super-dense, or "replete," sign.

[66] While the Roman alphabet and an MRI scan are representative examples of articulate and dense notations, respectively, there are other sign systems that likely fall somewhere between these two examples. For instance, the cuneiform sign system used in Akkadian might best be described as a "semi-dense" or "partially articulate" system. As discussed below (§4.3.4), this writing system allows for a wide variety of interpretive possibilities due to a certain degree of density in its signifying structures. However, in practice these possibilities were limited and thus cuneiform is at least somewhat disjoint and differentiated.

forms.[67] This might be especially true of divine imagery. It is well attested that multiple goddesses, including Astarte, Anat, Asherah, and Ishtar, were often identified or merged with one another, both in terms of attributes and iconographic profiles.[68] As a result, even if some of the goddess imagery can be differentiated in the manner Cornelius describes, one still must caution against the tendency to assume that visual analysis will *always* produce clearly demarcated typologies or that *every* image can be placed within these categories.[69] Though the impulse to create typologies can be helpful in many instances, it can also fail to acknowledge the nature of images as dense signs.

Second, Goodman's theory should prompt biblical scholars to revise the aims of the iconographic method in order to account more fully for how images signify as a type of non-articulate sign system. Goodman's theory calls for increased analytical sensitivity concerning how a wide range of visual features can potentially convey meaning.[70] In other words, what is true for the ungraduated thermometer or MRI scan would be true for an artistic representation: every difference in form can, at least potentially, make a difference in meaning.[71] In fact, Goodman describes images as a type of super-dense or "replete" sign system. As Mitchell describes it, a replete sign is one in which "every mark, every modification, every curve or swelling of a line, every modification of texture or color is loaded with semantic potential."[72]

In this view, an image contains a surplus of meaning that includes, but also extends beyond, the expression of its basic subject matter or symbolic content. As a result, visual features that are typically dismissed as being merely "decorative" or "stylistic" in some iconographic approaches would

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[67] Mitchell claims that in Goodman's notion of a dense sign system, "hybrid works are not only possible but are eminently describable" (*Iconology*, 70).

[68] Patrick D. Miller contends that the roles and functions of these goddesses often overlap and "exist in changing and sometimes ambiguous relationships" ("Aspects of the Religion of Ugarit," in idem, *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology: Collected Essays* [JSOTSup 267; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000], 72, 76–77). See also Strawn, "Whence Leonine Imagery? Iconography and the History of Israelite Religion," in *Images and Prophecy in the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean* (ed. Martti Nissinen and Charles E. Carter; FRLANT 233; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 64; Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 339–40; Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, eds., *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 108.

[69] One might also wonder if even the most visually literate ancient viewers were able to differentiate between different representations of the goddess as clearly as Cornelius seems to suppose.

[70] Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 252.

[71] In this sense, the example of an MRI scan (or the like) is better suited for comparison with art objects.

[72] Mitchell, *Iconology*, 67.

instead be thought to have a sign function that is structured by an underlying code. Determining how to decipher this code—that is, to derive actual semantic difference from the presence of syntactical density—would require an approach to visual analysis that attempts to subject a wide variety of visual features to close scrutiny.

4.2.3. Conclusions

Goodman's theory points to the possibility that a wide range of visual elements, many of which are not easily accounted for in Panofsky's schema, might participate in and contribute to the expression of an image's meaning. Rather than merely describing these features in terms of their aesthetic beauty or quality of craftsmanship, Goodman characterizes these visual elements as a type of non-linguistic sign system that exhibits both syntactic density and syntactic repleteness.[73] Though Goodman does not develop an explicit semiotic theory of aesthetics, his reflections on the nature of pictorial signs further support the notion that the meaning of an image cannot be reduced to the identification of its iconographic content.[74] In making this point, Goodman's visual theory demands that researchers think differently about the nature of visual representation and the methods required to read its pictorial "language."

While Goodman primarily deals with contemporary or everyday visual objects, I suggest that his theory can apply equally well to ancient art. Specifically, my argument is that images in the ancient world are best thought of as a syntactically dense and replete sign system in which every variation in visual form can be thought to have a semiotic function. Even compositional features that do not directly contribute to the expression of an im-

[73] Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 252.

[74] Other semioticians, such as Eco, move more explicitly in the direction of developing a semiotically informed aesthetic. Eco's theory is most clearly expressed in §3.7 of *A Theory of Semiotics* (261–76). In contrast to many aesthetic theories, Eco does more than just describe the aesthetic effects of a given work of art according to an interpretive intuition (274). Rather, Eco contends that even though "expressive" features of an image can be semantically ambiguous and can seem to exhibit a certain indescribable quality, they are semiotically relevant insofar as they contribute to the expression of what he calls a "surplus of content" (266). As such, even the chromatic quality of an image or the material out of which it is constructed is thought to have a certain sign function that is organized and structured according to an underlying code or intentional design (271). Analyzing this "surplus" entails maintaining a balance between "fidelity to the author and to the historical environment in which the message was emitted" and "the inventive *freedom"* the addressee has in filling out the ambiguity of the aesthetic message (Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 276). In a sense, what Eco tries to achieve by subjecting aesthetic features to semiotic analysis is to create a structured model for discerning the meaning of visual elements that are often thought to stimulate emotional reactions rather than communicate semantic content (276).

age's basic subject matter are relevant to an understanding of the image's overall meaning. To be sure, decoding the meaning of these visual details is a process that is fraught with ambiguity and open to multiple interpretations, as would be the case with reading an ungraduated thermometer or an MRI scan. Yet, the potential of ambiguity in visual analysis does not give warrant to the present tendency in iconographic methods to rigidly distinguish between intrinsic content and decorative detail, or objects of interpretation and corrective principles.[75] Instead, what is needed is a method of visual analysis that carefully considers how expressive or non-iconographic elements of a given artistic representation might shape and inform an image's communicative message. Instead of involving a step-by-step procedure that is applicable in the same way to all images, this approach would entail raising questions about how certain aspects of an image, such as its compositional design, rhetoric of display, and mode of signification, might function to shape how it conveys meaning. I present three brief case studies of these issues below (§§4.3.1–3).

4.3. Analyzing Art Beyond Iconography

To summarize my argument thus far, I have reasoned that the differences that obtain between Cornelius's and Goodman's approaches to visual analysis have much to do with their implicit assumptions about the nature of pictorial signs. Cornelius, like many other scholars who employ traditional iconographic methods, seems to read ancient art as a type of articulate sign system that signifies in much the same way as linguistic notations. This approach to image analysis is driven by two assumptions: (1) only visual features that directly pertain to an image's iconographic content have signifying value; and (2) for any given image, or element within an image, it is possible to assign to it one and only one distinct value. In contrast, Goodman's theory contends that most images function as a type of dense or replete sign system in which meaning is potentially encoded in a wide range of visual features, not just those that are directly related to the expression of the basic subject matter or intrinsic content.

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[75] For instance, Panofsky contends that not all created objects demand to be experienced aesthetically, such as images or texts that are designed to function as vehicles of communication ("The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline," in idem, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1955], 12). In contrast, Panofsky defines a "work of art" as an object which always demands to be experienced aesthetically, no matter what other purpose it might also serve (ibid., 11). For Panofsky, the distinction between practical objects and "art" not only depends on the intention of the author but also on a bifurcation of visual elements into those related to "idea" (content) and those related to "form" (style).

My own argument is *not* that all scholars who use iconography as a method of visual analysis are uninterested in analyzing visual features beyond the level of iconographic content. Indeed, some scholars, including both ANE art historians and biblical scholars, offer a "close reading" of ancient images that, at least implicitly, treats images in the manner Goodman proposes. Rather, my point is that Panofsky's method, as typically appropriated, fails to *explicitly* account for images as a dense or replete sign system.

What might it look like, then, to apply Goodman's understanding of non-linguistic sign systems to the analysis of ancient art? While not overtly appealing to Goodman's theory, several art historians, including Zainab Bahrani, Irene Winter, and Margaret Cool Root, have analyzed the meaning of ancient images beyond the level of iconography. By bringing a type of "semiotic" awareness to visual analysis, these scholars demonstrate in practice what Goodman prescribes in theory: discerning the meaning of artistic representations not only involves identifying *what* an image represents (i.e., its basic subject matter) but also evaluating *how* it signifies. In particular, Bahrani, Winter, and Root direct attention to aspects of images that are not readily accounted for in Panofsky's schema, including what I refer to as compositional design, rhetoric of display, and mode of signification. While some traditional iconographic studies take note of these visual features, they typically do not analyze them in terms of their signifying structure or contribution to the overall message of the image itself. The following brief examples demonstrate how Goodman's theory might further inform the ways in which biblical scholars analyze the meaning of ancient art beyond iconography.

4.3.1. Compositional Design

In most iconographic approaches to visual analysis, various aspects of an image's compositional design (e.g., the specific use and arrangement of color, line, perspective, symmetry, profile, size, layout, etc.) are often regarded either as corrective principles that help viewers properly identify artistic motifs or as decorative features that are non-essential when it comes to analyzing the image's basic content. Such tendencies are at least partially evident in Keel's revision of Panofsky's schema. Although Keel seems to acknowledge that an image contains a surplus of meaning that goes beyond any of the levels specified in **fig. 4.1**, he nevertheless refers to these elements as "decoration" and is primarily concerned with evaluating their quality and suitableness for a particular object.[76] Thus, even as Keel directs increased attention to what might be called elements of compositional de-

[76] Keel, *Das Recht*, 273.

sign, he does not seem to fully pursue their semiotic potential. Put in terms of Goodman's theory, in most applications of Panofsky's method, an image's compositional design is conceived of in much the same way as the style or size of font used to print letters of the Roman alphabet: while these elements might be visually interesting and perhaps even worth noting, they ultimately have no denotative value within the notational system. As long as a king or deity can be properly identified, it is relatively unimportant how they are displayed (e.g., their profile, size of the medium, etc.).[77]

Bahrani, however, takes a decidedly different approach to questions about the importance of an image's compositional design. In much of her research, Bahrani intends to offer a "close reading" of ANE art that takes seriously the semiotic density of non-linguistic sign systems. Such concerns are especially evident in her book, *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia*. In this volume, Bahrani analyzes how ancient Mesopotamian notions about gender and sexuality are socially constructed in and through artistic representation. In order to do so, Bahrani gives "serious consideration to [the] visual and aesthetic aspects" of various images, but especially those depicting female figures, be they human or divine.[78] Bahrani's analytical method sheds light on how subtle details of an image's compositional design make a difference in how that image signifies.

In particular, Bahrani's perspective diverges from traditional approaches to Mesopotamian goddess imagery, which have almost exclusively focused on classifying images into iconographic categories based on characteristic visual attributes.[79] While Bahrani admits that the traditional approach is of value, she nevertheless is critical of its rather narrow conceptualization of meaning in the visual arts. She argues:

> The focus [of these previous studies] is on iconographic taxonomies rather than style or composition. The point is to match up iconography and types on a one-to-one basis. In other words, iconographic meaning is assigned to specific attributes such as arm bands, headgear, and so on, in a scientific manner or according to a linguistic rationality derived from philology.[80]

In contrast, Bahrani aims to analyze "a broader range of semiotic issues" in visual representation, including "how female figures function . . . beyond their iconographic meaning."[81]

Bahrani's analysis of Ishtar imagery is especially relevant in this regard. These images, which first appeared in the glyptic record during the Early

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[77] This perspective might contribute to why many biblical scholars tend to focus on the line drawing of images rather than the photographic plate.

[78] Bahrani, *Women of Babylon*, 140.

[79] As is evident, for example, in Cornelius's *The Many Faces of the Goddess*.

[80] Bahrani, *Women of Babylon*, 130–31.

[81] Ibid., 131.

Dynastic period, have garnered considerable attention in Mesopotamian studies, perhaps because many scholars have regarded Ishtar's dual nature as a goddess of love and war as an enigmatic confluence of masculine and feminine traits.[82] In trying to grapple with the iconographic meaning of Ishtar's beautiful and violent attributes, some scholars have referred to this deity as a type of bipolar, bisexual, or even androgynous figure.[83] Not only does Bahrani critique the way in which these conclusions are based on problematic and unstable constructions of gender and sexuality, but she also redirects analysis toward another visual feature of Ishtar imagery that often is under-scrutinized.[84] Specifically, Bahrani notes that in many seals bearing Ishtar's image, such as is pictured in **fig. 4.4**, the goddess (near the center right of this line drawing)[85] appears in a mixed profile pose: the lower portion of her body faces to the side as her upper torso and face are twisted into a frontal position.[86] Although other scholars have recognized this curious feature, they have primarily discussed it in terms of its origins and distribution, both of which are traditional iconographic concerns.[87]

However, Bahrani contends that Ishtar's mixed profile is not incidental to the meaning of the image itself. Bahrani points out that in many of these compositions, Ishtar's pose makes it seem as if the goddess is in the process

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[82] See, for instance, Gudrun Colbow, *Die kriegerische Ištar: Zu den Erscheinungsformen bewaffneter Gottheiten zwischen der Mitte des 3. und der 2. Jahrtausends* (Munich: Profil Verlag, 1991).

[83] Bahrani, *Women of Babylon*, 143.

[84] For further discussion of Bahrani's response to this interpretive perspective, see chapter 7 of *Women of Babylon* ("Ishtar: The Embodiment of Tropes," 141–60). In brief, Bahrani draws on semiotic theory to argue that Ishtar functions as a polyvalent, "floating" signifier which absorbs meanings within the symbolic order. As such, certain cultural meanings and values are inscribed in visual representations of Ishtar. Namely, Bahrani contends that Ishtar is a figure who functions as "an embodiment of tropes of alterity who stands in for sexual otherness, excess, chaos, and even death" (150–51). Bahrani thus concludes that "Ishtar is the personification of all that is analogous to the feminine, all that is other, or falls in the realm of alterity, and, as such, she is the superlative figure of difference. . . . Read in semiotic terms, therefore, what has been perceived as a dichotomy of irreconcilable traits by traditional scholarship can be understood in terms of the figure of alterity and chaos" (159).

[85] The line drawing in fig. 4.4 is somewhat curious insofar as it places Ishtar to the far left of the visual frame. It would be equally possible—and, in my estimation, more fitting—to cut the image between the two deities standing back-to-back. Doing so would bring the image of Ishtar and the inscription to the center.

[86] Other figures are occasionally found in a mixed profile pose as well, including a few male deities, heroic figures, and composite creatures (see Bahrani, *Women of Babylon*, 133).

[87] Ibid., 131. For an example, see Colbow, *Die kriegerische Ištar*, 79–83, 95–99. However, Colbow does not distinguish between Ishtar imagery in which the goddess is in full frontal or mixed profile pose.

Figure 4.4. Akkadian seal with Ishtar (center right) in mixed profile pose, 2350–2150 B.C.E. Adapted from Collon, *Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum*, pl. XXXI.

of turning away from the other figures in the scene in order to face the viewer directly, thus creating a sense of movement.[88] This is particularly striking since the other figures in these compositions are typically isocephalic but in full profile, as is the case in **fig. 4.4**. In Bahrani's perspective, the sense of movement implied by Ishtar's pose becomes a point of focus within the image itself.[89] This aspect of the image's compositional design creates an act of "communication between the space of the pictorial scene and the space outside of it."[90]

The mixed profile pose "lures the viewer's gaze into the scene" and provokes a direct encounter with the deity—that is, in looking at the image the viewer observes the other figures but comes face-to-face with the goddess.[91] In this way, the viewer is seemingly not meant to be a passive observer, left only to decode the image's iconographic content (i.e., the identities of its various figures). Rather, and perhaps more immediately, the front-facing goddess seems to demand a response from the viewer: Will, or how will, he respond to Ishtar's power and sexual allure? Thus, in mixed profile, Ishtar is not simply an iconographic *symbol* of power but she is *an agent* who exerts power over those who are confronted by her gaze.

From the perspective of the iconographic method, the mixed profile pose is not essential for identifying the goddess as Ishtar. In fact, representations of Ishtar can still readily be identified even when the goddess appears in a full frontal or full profile pose. Nevertheless, this aspect of the image's compositional design informs a viewer's way of looking at and relating to the goddess. This is especially evident when Ishtar's mixed-profile pose is compared with the compositional design of the other major type of female figure depicted in glyptic art: the naked woman. These latter figures, which often appear on a pedestal with hands held together at the

[88] Bahrani, *Women of Babylon*, 133.
[89] Ibid., 131.
[90] Ibid., 133.
[91] Ibid., 133.

profile pose is compared with the compositional design of the other major type of female figure depicted in glyptic art: the naked woman. These latter figures, which often appear on a pedestal with hands held together at the waist, are typically in full frontal pose and are isolated from other figures in the scene.[92] Bahrani interprets this compositional design as one that suggests passivity and non-movement. She concludes that the image of the naked woman is intended as "the object of visual consumption" by the male gaze.[93] In this sense, the difference in compositional design between the Ishtar imagery and that of the naked woman is significant. Namely, while in a mixed profile pose Ishtar seems to actively turn to confront the viewer. The full profile position of the naked woman suggests that she is the passive "object of (implicitly male) surveillance and desire."[94] Thus, even though the profiles in which these figures are depicted do not directly impinge upon one's ability to identify who they represent, this element of design nevertheless seems to have an important signifying value. Indeed, the full frontal profile of the naked woman enables or even invites a different way of relating to the image than does the mixed profile pose of Ishtar. What an image means is, at least in part, contingent on how its compositional design structures a viewer's way of seeing—or indeed, being seen.

Not unlike Bahrani, Irene Winter also draws attention to the importance of another aspect of an image's compositional design: the size of the representational medium.[95] Winter is especially interested in situations in which identical or nearly identical motifs, such as the winged sun disk, the king in worship, or the king-and-lion combat scene, appear in both palace reliefs and miniature seals. In most iconographic approaches, the meanings of variously sized images are thought to be identical since they reflect the same, or nearly the same, subject matter and symbolic content.[96] Indeed, art historian Pierre Amiet once made this very point when, as the director of the Département des Antiquités Orientales at the Louvre, he set up an exhibit that juxtaposed enormous, free-standing photographic blow ups of ANE seal impressions with life-sized palace reliefs.[97] While such a comparison is

[92] Bahrani, *Women of Babylon*, 133.

[93] Ibid., 133.

[94] Ibid., 133. Thus, the confrontation that Bahrani speaks of is not so much a product of the frontal profile but rather the "turn" that is implied by the mixed profile.

[95] Winter, "*Le Palais imaginaire*: Scale and Meaning in the Iconography of Neo-Assyrian Cylinder Seals," in *Images as Media: Sources for the Cultural History of the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean (1st Millennium BCE)* (ed. Christoph Uehlinger; OBO 175; Fribourg: University Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 51–87.

[96] Panofsky's schema gives little explicit attention to questions about the scale of the visual object, even if certain scholars presuppose its importance. This is perhaps because Panofsky's primary object of study—Italian Renaissance paintings—were themselves somewhat uniform in size (Winter, *Le Palais imaginaire*, 77).

[97] For further discussion, see ibid., 52–53.

certainly justifiable on iconographic grounds, this approach tends to overlook scale as a design element and, in the process, renders seal impressions as nothing more than just "*monuments minuscule*."[98]

Winter, in contrast, is explicitly concerned with how and why the miniature scale of seal impressions might matter from a semiotic perspective. Winter argues that "the difference of scale, along with the contexts of use and experience these differences imply, must be kept in view if one is to capture particular aspects of reference and meaning within the originating tradition" of specific ANE art objects.[99] In other words, because the scale of an image directly impinges upon how it is used and in what context it is viewed, the same motif in a seal impression might have a different signifying value—or at least a different impact on the viewer—when it is encountered on a monumental relief.

For instance, Winter notes the fact that numerous Neo-Assyrian seals replicate a very common theme found in Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs in which the king and a winged genii flank a central tree and deity in winged disk form. The palace relief versions of this motif are closely associated with the king, since they are found immediately behind the throne or on the main doorway of the throne room or even on his garment. The seals often belong to high-ranking officials. Even though this iconographic parallel has been recognized, Winter argues that scholars rarely consider what an official intends to signify by utilizing this sort of motif on a seal.[100] One possibility is that by utilizing a motif that is so closely tied to the person of the king, an official would signal to observers of the seal that he was acting for or as an instrument of the state. In other words, the image of the seal must be analyzed not only in terms of the content of what is represented but also the significance of how and why it references other images that exist in contexts quite different than those associated with the seal itself.[101] Even raising the question of how size (and also function) impinge on an image's meaning is, as Winter puts it, "to move beyond the merely iconographic, i.e., identification of a motif, to the semiotic."[102] To quote and slightly adjust the well-known words of Marshall McLuhan, the scale of the medium is (part of) the message.[103]

Acknowledging that design elements such as a figure's profile or an image's size have semiotic potential does not imply that their meaning is easy to decode. As is the case in Bahrani's study, it is not always possible to establish a one-to-one relationship between a particular element of com-

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[98] Pierre Amiet, *Bas-reliefs imaginaires de l'Ancien Orient d'après les cachets et les sceaux-cylindres* (Paris: Hôtel de la monnaie, 1973), xxi.

[99] Winter, "*Le Palais imaginaire*," 53.

[100] Ibid., 67.

[101] Ibid., 79.

[102] Ibid., 67.

[103] Ibid., 83.

positional design (such as Ishtar's mixed profile pose) and a stable, clearly delineated message. Likewise, determining how an image's size impinges on the visual interpretation of different viewers is open to various explanations. Nonetheless, admitting that elements of compositional design are difficult to read is quite different than assuming that they have no signifying value. To be sure, there are various design elements that one might evaluate, and I do not mean to suggest that observations about compositional design in general are to be prioritized over traditional iconographic concerns about artistic motifs, conventional subject matter, and symbolic value.

In addition, it should be noted that similar conclusions about the importance of compositional design elements might be arrived at without the aid of Goodman's theory about dense or replete sign systems. Nevertheless, it is not readily apparent how or even if Panofsky's schema would *explicitly* account for the semiotic potential of these features.[104] The difference between Panofsky's method and what I propose in this section might merely be a matter of emphasis and not of fundamentally different views about the nature of pictorial signs. Nevertheless, the interpretive conclusions drawn by Bahrani and Winter are facilitated by an approach to visual analysis that more explicitly acknowledges the ways in which ancient images constitute a dense notational sign system.

4.3.2. Rhetoric of Display

Second and closely related, the iconographic method, at least as it is traditionally conceived, often draws sharp distinctions between subject matter and style. While the former is thought to communicate an image's intrinsic meaning, the latter is often judged to reflect the unconscious expression of cultural or personal habits and tendencies. This is especially evident in Panofsky's schema. In his first (i.e., "pre-iconographic") level of meaning, a viewer's ability to identify artistic motifs from practical experience is corrected and controlled by knowledge of the history of style, which Panofsky defines as "the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, *objects* and *events* were expressed by *forms*."[105] As a result, when questions about an image's style are surfaced in iconographic studies, it is often done for the purpose of identifying the primary subject matter and determining the historical antecedents of particular forms or motifs—that is, whether a certain depiction of royal triumph reflects a Greek or Neo-Assyrian repre-

[104] Although Bahrani does not explicitly draw on Goodman's notions about nonlinguistic sign systems in any of her research, her interpretive perspectives seem to be consonant with Goodman's visual theory.

[105] Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, 12; emphasis his.

sentational tradition. Such information can surely affect one's understanding of an image's meaning, but primarily from the vantage point of what it might reveal about the "etymology" of certain visual forms. In other words, an analysis of style typically only provides background information that can help the viewer better identify what an image is trying to represent.

In contrast, some ancient art historians, such as Winter and Root, utilize an approach to visual analysis that explores how stylistic features can play a more central role in constructing and conveying an image's meaning. For both of these scholars, style is not merely an unconscious expression of cultural or personal tendencies in artistic representation. Rather, style is best seen as a representational strategy that can be intentionally mobilized and manipulated in order to structure a given message or shape a certain response. In other words, style is a visual form of rhetoric.

Rather than only being interested in whence a given style is derived, Winter and Root consider style as a vehicle of persuasion. In this regard, Winter and Root anticipate the growing tendency in the field of rhetorical studies to attend to visual representation. While a clear definition of "visual rhetoric" has yet to emerge, this mode of inquiry generally seeks to understand how images make arguments through the selection, arrangement, and manipulation of visual forms—that is, the rhetoric of display.[106] Many studies in this area focus not only on how visual symbols are used for the purposes of communication and persuasion but also on how certain symbolic processes manipulate and/or mobilize specific messages.[107] Such perspectives are often taken up in reference to images in contemporary advertisements, political campaigns, and popular culture. Yet, as Winter, Root, and others have shown, understanding style in terms of the rhetoric of display can likewise illuminate the meaning of ancient art.[108]

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[106] For instance, Sonja K. Foss describes visual rhetoric as "a mode of inquiry, defined as a critical theoretical orientation that makes issues of visuality relevant to rhetorical theory" ("Framing the Study of Visual Rhetoric: Toward a Transformation of Rhetorical Theory," in *Defining Visual Rhetorics* [ed. Charles A. Hill and Marguerite Helmers; Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004], 306). For further discussion, see the numerous other essays in the volume, *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, as well as Lawrence J. Prelli's essay "Rhetorics of Display: An Introduction," in *Rhetorics of Display* (Studies in Rhetoric/Communication; Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 1–38.

[107] Foss, "Framing the Study of Visual Rhetoric," 304. More specifically, Charles A. Hill suggests that "to ask how images work to influence viewers' beliefs, attitudes, and opinions is ultimately to ask about the very nature of images and about how people respond to them" ("The Psychology of Rhetorical Images," in *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, 26).

[108] Vernon K. Robbins has coined the term "rhetography" as a way of referring to a mode of argumentation that reasons by means of figurative imagery. Put simply, rhetography does visually what rhetoric (or perhaps better, "rhetology") does verbally. However, Robbins primarily employs rhetography in reference to *textual* imagery, not ancient art. As such, this term would have to be nuanced slightly in order to be used for the purposes of iconographic exegesis. For further discussion, see Robbins, "Rhetography: A New Way of

A brief example from the research of both Winter and Root illustrates how this "style-as-rhetoric" approach might shed new light on ancient artifacts. First, in an essay on the depiction of Naram-Sîn (ca. 2254–2218 B.C.E.) in his famous victory stele, Winter contends that the king is portrayed in what she calls a particularly "alluring" style, with muscled calves and arms, rounded buttocks, and full beard (**fig. 4.5**).[109] According to Winter, this style was designed to construct an idealized sense of the royal body as one of "good conformation, auspiciousness, (male) vigor, and (sexual) allure."[110] Since previous kings were not depicted in a similar fashion, Winter concludes that the style of Naram-Sîn's victory stele reflects a "conscious strategy of representation" designed to render the king in ways more typically reserved for gods or semi-divine heroes.[111]

In Winter's estimation, the blending of the sexually alluring body of the king with divine visual connotations provides a powerful form of visual rhetoric that functions on at least two levels.[112] On the one hand, this representational style coincides with other rhetorical strategies, such as depicting Naram-Sîn with divine headgear and using the divine determinative before the king's name in textual sources, that seek to affirm Naram-Sîn's elevated status as a god. On the other hand, Winter suggests that the combination of sexual allure and violence in Naram-Sîn's victory stele also creates a "locus of pleasurable engagement." The rhetoric of this form of display not only depicts the king's triumphal rise to power but also shapes the gaze of the viewer through a particular construction of gendered identity.[113]

Seeing the Familiar Text," in *Words Well Spoken: George Kennedy's Rhetoric of the New Testament* (ed. C. Clifton Black and Duane F. Watson; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), 81–106; and idem, "Enthymeme and Picture in the *Gospel of Thomas*," in *Thomasine Traditions in Antiquity: The Social and Cultural World of the Gospel of Thomas* (ed. Jón Ma Ásgeirsson, April D. DeConick, and Risto Uro; NHMS 59; Boston: Brill, 2006), 175–207.

[109] Irene Winter, "Sex, Rhetoric, and the Public Monument: The Alluring Body of Naram-Sîn of Agade," in *Sexuality in Ancient Art: Near East, Egypt, Greece, and Italy* (ed. Natalie Boymel Kampen, et al.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11–26.

[110] Ibid., 15. For further discussion of these terms and why Winter considers the visual features of Naram-Sîn to be "alluring," see the brief discussion on 11–15.

[111] Ibid., 16.

[112] Ibid., 22.

[113] Specifically, Winter makes the following observation: "Viewed in this light, Naram-Sîn's display of male attributes on a public monument does more than just narrate his role as victorious potentate. By setting up active currents of positive value through seductive allure, the display also facilitates identificatory processes that elicit a series of vicarious associations and projections that have a socializing function: for women, their subordination to desire and by men: for men, their fusion with authority at the same time as they are subject to it" (ibid., 21).


Figures 4.5–6. Left: Close up of the Akkadian king Naram-Sîn from the Victory Stele of Naram-Sîn, 23rd c. B.C.E. Image available in the public domain: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stele_Naram_Sim_Louvre_Sb4.jpg; cf. Feldman, "Darius I and the Heroes of Akkad," 293 fig. 7. Right: Close up of the Persian king Darius I from the Behistun relief, late-6th c. B.C.E. Image available in the public domain: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Darius.jpg; cf. Feldman, "Darius I and the Heroes of Akkad," 291 fig. 5.

While Winter's observations raise important questions about the intersection of sexuality, gender, and politics in the ANE world, for our purposes it is more pertinent to underscore the methodological implications of her approach for visual analysis. In this example, questions of style are not separate from the determination of meaning. Rather, as was the case for Goodman and Mitchell, Winter's research seems to treat the image of Naram-Sîn as a dense or replete sign, in which "every mark, every modification, every curve or swelling of a line" is loaded with semiotic potential.[114] Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, for Winter these features are not merely a symptom of cultural or personal tendencies, but rather are intentionally deployed for rhetorical purposes. In this sense, Naram-Sîn's "alluring" body might be thought of as a symptom of a carefully constructed ideology of kingship, if not also gender and sexuality. To press the point further, Naram-Sîn's muscled calves and arms, rounded buttocks, and full beard are *not* akin to, say, the style of font in an articulate notational system, such as the Roman alphabet (see §4.2.2). Though Naram-Sîn could be identified without the presence of these features, they are nevertheless integral to the stele's intended rhetorical message—that is to say, they contribute to the denotative value of the image. This is not just Naram-Sîn the king, but Naram-Sîn the triumphant and alluring god-king.

[114] Mitchell, *Iconology*, 67.

A similar approach is also on display in Margaret Cool Root's analysis of style and meaning in the Behistun relief.[115] Root notes that certain aspects of how Darius the Great is depicted, including the drapery of his clothes, the plasticity of his physical features, and his posture with respect to the conquered foes (**fig. 4.6**), reflect an artistic style reminiscent of Naram-Sîn's victory stele. In Root's estimation, these similarities of style do not merely suggest that the artists who created the Behistun relief had unconsciously inherited an ancient Mesopotamian stylistic tradition of representing the triumphant king. While Root does not deny that personal or cultural tendencies can and are passed on through individual artists, she instead emphasizes the way in which Achaemenid iconography was the product of an intentionally conceived artistic program designed to communicate a certain vision of kingship and imperial ideology.[116]

In doing so, Root shifts attention from the style of specific artists to the rhetorical strategy of those who commissioned and controlled the entire artistic program of the Achaemenid empire. In fact, Root argues that Achaemenid kings, including Darius himself, would have played an active role in selecting and adapting specific styles and motifs for the purposes of communicating a well-crafted vision of kingship. Viewed from this perspective, the stylistic features of the Behistun relief constitute a strategy of visual rhetoric intended to link Darius with the great Mesopotamian rulers of the past. Through its stylistic details, the subject matter of the Behistun relief generates what Root calls "a series of calculated allusions to antique traditions" and, in so doing, intentionally appropriates for Darius what Root believes to be the ideology of kingship once embodied in depictions of Naram-Sîn.[117]

That such allusions exist is not only interesting from the vantage point of identifying the historical antecedents of a long-standing representational tradition associated with ANE kings. Panofsky's methodology, after all, would likely lead a researcher to study the history of style that lies behind the depiction of Darius and how it might further inform the identification of certain forms and motifs. Yet, since Panofsky treats style primarily as a "corrective principle" for his first level of meaning (pre-iconographic), it is not as clear that his methodology would fully address how or why the particular style of depiction in this relief functions to shape or inform a viewer's understanding of Achaemenid kingship.

Root, in contrast, understands style as having an affective purpose.[118] In this view, the correspondences between the depictions of Darius and Na-

[115] Margaret Cool Root, *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art: Essays on the Creation of an Iconography of Empire* (Acta Iranica 19; Textes et mémoires 9; Leiden: Brill, 1979), esp. 182–226.

[116] Ibid., 1–42.

[117] Ibid., 191.

[118] Ibid., 214.

ram-Sîn are best understood as an effort to construct a vision of Darius' kingship that references the tradition of conquest and expansion associated with Naram-Sîn's reign. Darius might be thought of as attempting to bolster his own claim to power and legitimacy as the ascendant ruler by commissioning a monumental relief that alludes to or explicitly references what Root calls "associations with archetypal power."[119] In this way, it might well be concluded that the Behistun relief is a type of dense non-linguistic sign system in which stylistic features encode information that is crucial to the image's intended rhetorical message.[120] In other words, to know what the depiction of Darius in the Behistun relief means, one must analyze how it argues.

In both of these examples, Winter and Root employ approaches to meaning in the visual arts that go beyond the level of iconographic content or at least conceptualize the relationship between style and meaning in ways that are slightly different than what is found in Panofsky's approach. While neither of these scholars makes explicit reference to the emerging field of visual rhetoric or even the visual theory of Nelson Goodman, they each tacitly assume that: (1) analyzing an image's "style" is not simply a matter of tracing historical antecedents of visual forms; and (2) images are dense with semiotic potential insofar as "stylistic" details can reference the signifying value of a wide range of other images. As a result, both scholars contend that an image's style constitutes a strategy of representation that seeks to construct and convey a certain ideological message through the subtle manipulation of visual features.

Once again, it is important to note that those using Panofsky's schema might well raise questions that closely resemble those that are found in Winter's and Root's analyses. However, by framing these issues in terms of the "rhetoric of display" instead of style, a slightly revised method of visual analysis would shift more attention to the persuasive power of subtle pictorial details. This sort of approach to visual analysis would make the iconographic method more "ideologically aware," while at the same time prompting rhetorical studies to be more "iconographically aware."[121]

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[119] Root, *The King and Kingship*, 213.

[120] For further discussion about the question of style and meaning in the Behistun relief, see Marian H. Feldman, "Darius I and the Heroes of Akkad: Affect and Agency in the Bisitun Relief," in *Ancient Near Eastern Art in Context: Studies in Honor of Irene J. Winter by Her Students* (ed. Jack Cheng and Marian H. Feldman; CHANE 26; Boston: Brill, 2007), 265–93.

[121] Mitchell makes a similar claim in his critique of Panofsky's method. See *Picture Theory*, 30.

4.3.3. Mode of Signification

Biblical scholars have long been interested in how visual materials might be utilized for the purposes of historical research. While the scope and subject matter of these studies vary greatly, Christoph Uehlinger is right to note that "there is hardly any historical interpretation of visual documents that would currently not be based on iconography."[122] From this methodological vantage point, identifying an image's basic subject matter and intrinsic content can reveal valuable information about historical people, events, practices, and beliefs.

There is much to recommend about this approach to visual analysis, not to mention the growing trend to incorporate ANE art along with texts and other artifacts in the study of biblical history. However, as has been the case in the previously discussed examples, the iconographic method can potentially overlook important questions regarding *how* images signify historical content and what sort of information they provide about the past.[123] Addressing these issues requires more careful reflection on what I am referring to as an image's "mode of signification"—that is, the level of correspondence that exists between a visual sign and its intended referent in the external world. Raising questions about an image's mode of signification has the potential not only to further inform our understanding of the relationship between ANE art and history but also to shed light on the visual strategies employed in and through certain types of images.[124]

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[122] Uehlinger, "Neither Eyewitnesses, Nor Windows to the Past, but Valuable Testimony in its Own Right: Remarks on Iconography, Source Criticism and Ancient Data-Processing," in *Understanding the History of Ancient Israel* (ed. H. G. M. Williamson; Proceedings of the British Academy 143; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 186.

[123] However, it should be noted that more critical reflection on the use of pictorial data in historical research has already begun to emerge. Within iconographic exegesis, two important articles by Uehlinger address these issues, including the previously mentioned essay "Neither Eyewitnesses, Nor Windows," as well as idem, "Clio in a World of Pictures: Another Look at the Lachish Reliefs from Sennacherib's Southwest Palace at Nineveh," in *Like a Bird in a Cage: The Invasion of Sennacherib in 701 BCE* (ed. Lester L. Grabbe; JSOTSup 363; ESHM 4; New York: Sheffield Academic, 2003), 223–305. Outside of iconographic exegesis, one should especially note the work of Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing* (2001). While these studies develop more sophisticated understandings of how and to what extent images function as a "witness" to the past, they do not, on the whole, deal with questions about visual theory.

[124] Bahrani sums up the matter concisely: "Perceptual and conceptual art can thus be defined as terms for evaluating levels of correspondence between the mimetic image and what it represents or the proximity of resemblance between sign and referent" (*The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* [Archaeology, Culture, and Society series; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003], 88). In Bahrani's view, the terms perceptual and conceptual do not refer to separate categories of art but rather to different "polarities of mimesis" (ibid., 88).

Since at least the time of Aristotle, the Western intellectual tradition has been interested in questions concerning modes of signification in the visual arts. Much of the attention has focused on notions about mimesis, which refers to the extent to which art aims to "match" or copy the actual appearance of the external world. As noted earlier, scholars commonly have evaluated the level of mimesis or resemblance that obtains between an image and its referent in terms of either "perceptual" or "conceptual" art. While perceptual art is thought to imitate nature through an accurate record of human perception, conceptual art is seen as portraying the external world through conventional or unmotivated signs. This traditional distinction between perceptual and conceptual art has functioned not only as a way of differentiating between different modes of signification (i.e., matching vs. making, mimetic vs. symbolic) but it has also has been used to categorize images according to assumptions about their distribution geographically (West vs. East), chronologically (modern vs. ancient), culturally (civilized vs. primitive), or even politically (democratic vs. "despotic").[125] However, recent work in visual theory has challenged these binary oppositions. Rather than being stable or universally given, the categories of perceptual and conceptual are best thought of as culturally determined polarities along a continuum of representational practices.[126]

How have these understandings about the semiotics of visual display implicitly influenced the way in which biblical scholars have interpreted ANE art for the purposes of historical research? Prior to the rise of the Fribourg School in 1970s (and in certain cases thereafter), biblical scholars often presumed that ANE art provided a mimetic record of historical perception.[127] As a type of historical photograph, images were thought to offer a somewhat unambiguous "window" to the way things were or how people or places looked. This approach to image analysis is evident in the work of David Ussishkin, who contends that the Lachish reliefs from Room XXXVI of Sennacherib's Southwest palace in Nineveh represent a type of perceptual account of the city's topography when viewed from a certain vantage point.[128] In Ussishkin's view, the subject matter of the Lachish re-

[125] The mapping of perceptual and conceptual modes of representation onto the axes of time, space, culture, and political system is on display in Gombrich's *Art and Illusion,* especially in the chapter "Reflections on the Greek Revolution" (116–45). For a helpful discussion, see Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 85–86.

[126] Ibid., 87–88.

[127] For a discussion, see Keel, "Iconography and the Bible," *ABD* 3:358–60.

[128] See David Ussishkin, "The 'Lachish Reliefs' and the City of Lachish," *IEJ* 30 (1980): 174–95. See also from Ussishkin: *The Conquest of Lachish by Sennacherib* (Publications of the Institute of Archaeology 6; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Institute of Archaeology, 1982); "The Assyrian Attack on Lachish: The Archaeological Evidence from the Southwest Corner of the Site," *Tel Aviv* 17 (1990): 53–86; "Excavations and Restoration Work at Tel Lachish 1985–1994: Third Preliminary Report," *Tel Aviv* 23 (1996): 3–60; and

liefs is based on eyewitness evidence and, as a result, reflects exactly how the battle would have appeared to the Assyrian king, who looked on from a hill just southwest of the city.[129]

More recently, however, Uehlinger has offered a nuanced perspective that recognizes how ancient images, including the Lachish reliefs, "document ways of seeing or looking at and representing reality much more than that reality itself."[130] While images provide valuable testimony about history, they, like texts, do so through a conventional code that is both socially and ideologically constructed. Working from this perspective, Keel argues that ANE images function not unlike determinatives in Akkadian or Middle Egyptian insofar as they strive to represent certain concepts or classes of objects rather than the actual physical likeness of individual people or events. Uehlinger effectively conceptualizes iconographic content and subject matter in terms of how an image conveys certain views on society, social practices, political institutions, and so forth. To put the matter simply, as a form of conceptual art, ancient images are not so much a window to the past as they are a witness to a culturally conditioned "gaze."[131]

Nevertheless, to affirm that ANE art is more conceptual than it is perceptual does not fully resolve questions related to modes of signification. Even the more sophisticated approaches outlined above primarily seek to make judgments about *what* an image represents, such as whether an image depicts "real" history or "mere" ideology. While such distinctions are possible and helpful, both Bahrani and Winter press the matter further. At various points in their research, these scholars raise important questions about how the very notions of history and ideology, reality and rhetoric, are contingent on specific theories and strategies of visual representation. For instance, Bahrani suggests that "reading images is no more direct or unproblematic than reading texts or material remains. If representation is at the heart of ideology, then discussions of ideology in the past must begin to address theories of representation."[132] In other words, when it comes to historical research, visual analysis must not only address the levels of mimetic correspondence that exist between an image and what it represents but also how these modes of display are implemented in order to manipulate the observer's understanding of the past.[133]

The Renewed Archaeological Excavations at Lachish (1973–1994) (PIA 22; Tel Aviv: Emery and Claire Yass Publications in Archaeology, 2004).

[129] For further discussion and critique, see Uehlinger, "Clio in a World of Pictures," esp. 249–62.

[130] Idem, "Neither Eyewitnesses nor Windows," 181.

[131] Ibid., 181.

[132] Bahrani, *Rituals of War: The Body and Violence in Mesopotamia* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 74.

[133] Uehlinger essentially offers a compatible perspective in his essay, "Clio in a World of Pictures."

A particularly compelling example of this sort of analysis is found in Winter's research on "historical narratives" in Neo-Assyrian palace wall reliefs.[134] This form of art, which often depicts military battles, lion hunts, or tribute processions, increasingly appears on the alabaster and limestone lined walls of Neo-Assyrian palaces beginning during the reign of Assurnasirpal II (885–856 B.C.E.) and continuing through the seventh century. While space prohibits a full discussion of the concept of narrative in the visual arts,[135] it will suffice to note that Winter uses this term to refer "to the [visual] representation of a specific historical event—not generic emblem or hieroglyph, but individuals and elements presumed to have been associated with the actual spatio-temporal experience."[136] Narrative art typically implies action, suggests some coherent sequence of events, and is meant to display the particularity of a given place, person, or moment.[137] Indeed, specific aspects of these narrative reliefs, such as topographical features, characteristic elements of dress, or recognizable events, might be understood to function as "verifiers of the [historical] 'truth' of the scene"[138] or to provide what Barthes calls a "pure spectatorial consciousness of 'historical reality.'"[139] In comparison to the cultic or mythological scenes that are also present in Neo-Assyrian palaces, historical narratives are far more perceptual than they are conceptual, and, as a result, it might be tempting to see these images as a type of message without a code or an unambiguous window to the past, as seems to be the case with Ussishkin's analysis of the Lachish reliefs.

However, Winter contends that there is "an ideological 'end' to the apparent historicity of [these] representations."[140] Their mode of signification is carefully manipulated and the perception of realism is intentionally invoked not for the purposes of displaying verisimilitude but in order to "naturalize" its underlying rhetorical purpose. As Barthes puts it, the perceptual mode of signification employed in the image "innocents the semantic arti-

[134] Winter, "Royal Rhetoric and the Development of Historical Narrative in Neo-Assyrian Reliefs," *Studies in Visual Communication* 7 (1981): 1–38.

[135] A helpful, but rather imprecise definition of narrative in art is provided by Carl H. Kraeling: "Narrative art is identified as representations of a specific event, involving specific persons, where the action and persons *might* be historical, but not necessarily" ("Narration in Ancient Art: A Symposium—Introduction," *AJA* 61 [1957]: 43). For further discussion, see the proceedings of the symposium on this topic held at the University of Chicago (Carl H. Kraeling, et al., *Narration in Ancient Art: A Symposium, 57th General Meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America, Chicago, Illinois, December 29, 1955* [Chicago: Archaeological Institute of America, 1957]).

[136] Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 2.

[137] Ibid., 2.

[138] Ibid., 2.

[139] Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," 45.

[140] Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 3.

fice of connotation," and therefore invites the viewer to receive the content of the image *as if* it reflected the reality of things in a naturalistic and unmanipulated way.[141] Rather than merely distinguishing between perceptual and conceptual modes of signification, Winter (following Barthes) analyzes the way in which mimetic representation can be used as a rhetorical strategy in Neo-Assyrian wall reliefs.

This line of reasoning might shed light on why historical narratives were increasingly used in Neo-Assyrian palaces in the first place. Winter notes that this form of art occurs during a time when rapid geo-political expansion would have produced a far more heterogeneous population in the Neo-Assyrian empire.[142] As was argued in §2.3.2, it is likely the case that, in comparison to more symbolic imagery, narrative scenes were easier to comprehend since they would have required less prior knowledge and shared experience.[143] In Winter's estimation, the proliferation of historical narratives "represents a lowering of the common denominator of what would be intelligible to a heterogeneous audience, and that these developments were a direct response to the increased heterogeneity of the [Neo-Assyrian] Empire as it developed."[144] Yet, while this mode of signification might be more legible to a wider audience, its very readability "masks the constructed meaning under the appearance of the given."[145] The particularity and realism of the historical narratives belie the fact that they articulate an imperial ideology, which, according to Jonathan Culler, "justifies particular economic, political, and intellectual practices by concealing their historical origins and making them the natural components of an interpreted world."[146] Put differently, Neo-Assyrian historical narratives employ a perceptual mode of signification not in order to provide an unambiguous window to the past but rather to subtly configure, and indeed, justify, a particular version (or vision) of history.

What Winter's research demonstrates is that for the purposes of historical research, it is necessary to employ an approach to visual analysis that directly engages questions about the semiotics of different modes of signification. This would entail not only recognizing the differences between perceptual and conceptual art but also evaluating how and why aspects of visual representation such as realism might be employed for reasons other than displaying the past as it actually was. Winter's approach to visual analysis once again moves beyond the level of iconography, even if only in emphasis. As is the case with the examples discussed above (§§4.3.1–2),

[141] Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," 45.

[142] Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 29.

[143] Ibid., 30.

[144] Ibid., 30.

[145] Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," 47; as cited by Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 29.

[146] Jonathan Culler, "Structure of Ideology and Ideology of Structure," *New Literary History* 4 (1973): 473.

Winter's approach to visual analysis, at least implicitly, reflects some degree of conceptual overlap with Nelson Goodman's visual theory. In particular, an image's mode of signification might be thought of as a characteristic of a dense or replete sign system. Particularity and realism in historical narrative are densely coded signs that not only communicate basic subject matter but also express meaning beyond the iconographic level. In addition, by raising questions about how certain types of images signify, Winter, like Goodman, brings a certain semiotic awareness to her understanding of the nature of pictorial representation and the meaning of the visual arts.

4.3.4. Caveats and Conclusions

Semiotic approaches to visual analysis, whether derived from the theory of Nelson Goodman or the art historical research of Irene Winter, Zainab Bahrani, and Margaret Cool Root, can raise new questions and offer fresh insights into the meaning of ancient visual materials. However, at the same time, the integration of contemporary theory with the study of ancient art is subject to several lines of critique.

For one, it might be suggested that Goodman's theory, as it is a product of contemporary art criticism, should best (or only) be applied to modern art, particularly of the abstract or surrealist varieties. Since visual theory tends to reflect the interpretive perspectives of modern scholars—as critics might argue—it would be anachronistic to apply this perspective to the analysis of *ancient* art. Bahrani partially anticipates this objection near the conclusion of *Women of Babylon*.

In defense of her attempt to pursue a semiotic approach to the analysis of ANE art, Bahrani rightly notes that all scholarship is unavoidably dependent on contemporary epistemologies and theoretical frameworks.[147] She asserts, "Many studies that are purported to be traditional or 'non-theoretical' simply continue to rely upon theories originally put forth by [earlier] scholars."[148] In my estimation, the iconographic method reflects an approach to interpreting ancient art that is no less theoretical—and, indeed, no less anachronistic—than a semiotic one. The only question is how willing scholars are to scrutinize the preliminary considerations and operative assumptions that lie behind these and other methods of interpretation.

Even if contemporary semiotic theory provides a valid heuristic framework for interpreting ancient art, a second objection might be raised: Did ancient viewers *really* read images as a type of dense or replete notation? While Goodman does not address the situation of specific ancient cultures, he acknowledges that the nature of linguistic and non-linguistic signs varies

[147] Bahrani, *Women of Babylon*, 141.
[148] Ibid., 142.

across time and place. In *Languages of Art*, he emphasizes that the differences that obtain between linguistic and non-linguistic signs are not metaphysical but rather contextual. "A picture in one system," Goodman notes, "may be a description in another."[149] In commenting on Goodman's approach to this issue, Mitchell contends that "what determines the mode of reading [in a given context] is the symbol system that happens to be in effect, and this is regularly a matter of habit, convention, and authorial stipulation—thus, a matter of choice, need, and interest."[150]

One might press the issue further by asking if there is any reason to believe that a mode of reading was in effect in the ancient world that would have led viewers, by convention and habit, to analyze images beyond the level of iconography? Offering a definitive answer to this question would prove difficult. Not only is there limited direct evidence for how ancient viewers would have understood the nature of pictorial signs but it is also possible that viewing habits varied across different cultures and time periods in antiquity.[151] Nevertheless, several general observations suggest that images, especially in the ancient Near Eastern world, were read and interpreted as a type of dense sign.

To begin with, while ANE cultures did not have a clearly defined sense of the "fine arts" or even the creation of art "for art's sake," Winter suggests that it was nevertheless the case that ancient viewers contemplated and wrote about images in ways that reflect an appreciation for aspects of artistic design, craftsmanship, and style that go beyond the level of iconography.[152] For instance, in Mesopotamian records scribes acknowledge that the construction of visual objects requires special skill (*nēmequ*) and ingenuity (*nikiltu*) and they customarily take note of how images are decorated (*zaʾānu*) and made splendid (*šarāḫu*).[153]

Likewise, a variety of terms in Akkadian are used to positively assess an image's physical qualities, such as *banū* ("well-formed"), *damqu* ("handsome, beautiful"), *kuzbu* ("alluring"), *nawru* ("radiant"), *napardû* ("shining

[149] Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 226. Mitchell points to some interesting examples of this phenomenon: a paragraph might be turned 90° and read as a city skyline or a picture might be composed in such a fashion so as to be read from left to right (*Iconology*, 70).

[150] Mitchell, *Iconology*, 70.

[151] However, in her analysis of Mesopotamian responses to the visual arts, Winter contends that textual materials that discuss images, which span over two thousand years, display "a surprising degree of continuity in both vocabulary and modes of perception and valuation, despite historical and political change" (Winter, "Aesthetics in Ancient Mesopotamian Art," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* [ed. Jack Sasson; 4 vols.; New York: Scribner, 1995], 2570). Thus, while one should exercise caution in speaking about a monolithic ANE semiotics or ANE visual culture, it is not necessarily the case that understandings of pictorial representation would have varied greatly in different times and places in the ancient world.

[152] Ibid., 2569.

[153] Ibid., 2571–72.

brightly), and *simat tanādāti* ("praiseworthy").[154] Winter also points out that the Mesopotamian tradition "constantly reinforces the act of looking and seeing in the appreciation of the [visual] object" through its use of a nuanced set of verbs that describe how a viewer sees (*barû*), examines (*amāru*), experiences (*dagālu*), gazes at (*naṭālu*), and diverts attention to (*palāsu*) various types of images.[155]

Furthermore, it was believed that Mesopotamian images were more than just vehicles of communication. They could produce delight and joy on behalf of their divine audiences or inspire admiration and awe on behalf of human observers.[156] There is even evidence to suggest that Assyrian (and Egyptian) kings had the ability to choose between alternative representations of themselves based on subtle visual details, such as the depiction of their hands, chin, and hair.[157] These observations suggest that, for at least some ancient viewers, visual analysis entailed closely scrutinizing subtle details in the image's design and style. This is not to say that there were universal rules for how these features were read nor even that all ancient images functioned as a type of dense or replete sign in the same way as Goodman describes.[158] Nevertheless, Winter's research on Mesopotamian aesthetics raises the possibility that even in the ancient world, minor details in visual representation were not only noticed, but were thought to play an important role in how an image functioned.

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[154] Winter, "Aesthetics," 2572–76. For a more specific discussion of how some of these terms apply to a given work of art, see Winter's previously discussed article, "Sex, Rhetoric, and the Public Monument," 11–26.

[155] Eadem, "Aesthetics," 2576.

[156] Ibid., 2577.

[157] For a brief discussion, see eadem, "Art in Empire: The Royal Image and the Visual Dimensions of Assyrian Ideology," in *Assyria 1995: Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Helsinki, September 7–11, 1995* (ed. Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997), 376. These decisions were likely not made on the basis of the image resembling the king in any naturalistic way. Rather, the king's image was most likely constructed based on what were thought to be the ideal physical qualities of a divinely chosen king. Thus, rather than represent a *portrait* of the individual king, these images reflect a socially constructed *portrayal* of ideal kingship.

[158] However, some modern contributions to semiotics do attempt to account more explicitly for how aesthetic features encode meaning. For instance, Eco uses the term "aesthetic idiolect" to describe "the unique diagram which makes all deviations [in a work] mutually functional" (*A Theory of Semiotics*, 272). As a result, visual analysis entails detecting and describing this idiolect in a given work, inducing general rules from specific cases, and proposing tentative ways of decoding the aesthetic sign function. Despite Eco's previously mentioned resistance to "verbocentric dogmatism" in semiotic theory, it is interesting to note that he seems to revert to language theory when he describes this aesthetic code as an "idiolect."

Yet, beyond this evidence for a general "art appreciation" in the ancient world, there are more specific reasons to believe that the sorts of semiotic perspectives discussed above were not altogether foreign to ANE visual culture. In both *Rituals of War* and *The Graven Image*, Bahrani proposes that ancient Mesopotamians "were the first to develop a rigorous system of reading visual signs according to a method we now call semiotics."[159]

This is especially evident in how ancient Mesopotamian priests and scribes attempted to interpret mantic signs through divination and cuneiform signs through textual exegesis. In Bahrani's estimation, divination (*barûtu*) is not unlike textual exegesis (*pašāru*) insofar as both entail a hermeneutical process of interpreting signs according to a culturally-conditioned code.[160] In fact, Bahrani contends that mantic and cuneiform signs have a similar underlying semiotic structure insofar as they both are based on a system of signification in which there is an (almost) infinite play of possible meanings.[161] These observations are not necessarily generalizable to visual signs or visual culture. Nevertheless, the nexus between *barûtu*/*pašāru* and semiotics establishes that at least some types of signs were perceived to be what Goodman would call a dense or replete notational system.

In order to describe the nature of mantic signs, Bahrani draws on the work of historian Carlo Ginzburg.[162] In his essay on the history of semiotic analysis, Ginzburg contends that various methods of interpretation, including art historical connoisseurship, detective work, psychoanalysis, and medical diagnostics or "symptomatology," are all based upon a conjectural model of knowledge that is akin to semiotics—that is, it presumes that certain clues or signs (i.e., the details of a painting, a crime scene, a dream, a human body) must be deciphered in order to reveal an encoded message.[163] In Ginzburg's view, the roots of this model of inquiry can be found in the ancient Mesopotamian practice of divination, which was based on the idea that the gods communicated with humanity by inscribing signs into the very fabric of the universe.[164] As such, physical features of the everyday world, including the position of the stars (astrology), the appearance of the human body (physiognomy), the form of animal entrails (extispicy and hepatoscopy), and so forth—were understood to function as a type of di-

[159] Bahrani, *Rituals of War*, 57. For further discussion, see especially the chapters in *Rituals of War* titled "Babylonian Semiotics," 57–74 and "The Mantic Body," 75–100; and, in *The Graven Image,* "Being in the Word: Of Grammatology and Mantic," 96–120.

[160] Eadem, *Rituals of War*, 63.

[161] In practice, however, there were limits to the interpretation of cuneiform signs.

[162] Carlo Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method," *History Workshop* 9 (1980): 5–36.

[163] Ibid., 11–12.

[164] Ibid., 22, 27.

vinely coded mantic sign that, when properly deciphered, could reveal the will of the gods.

What is important to note is that ancient viewers not only assumed that the world was filled with these sorts of signs but that these signs were themselves filled with enormous semiotic potential. In most cases, a special *barû* priest, who closely examined subtle details in the visual form of these "divine pictograms," was needed to unlock their encoded meaning.[165] In order to guide their interpretations, these priests relied on massive catalogues of pre-established codes that organized signs and their meaning in terms of a system of *protasis* and *apodosis* ("if x, then y").[166] In many of these cases, the sign and its meaning were linked by certain tropes or rhetorical modes, such as metonymy, synecdoche, metaphor, synonym, or homophony.[167] In either case, mantic signs of all varieties were read much like medical symptoms: each change in visual form signaled a change in the meaning communicated by the gods.[168] Thus, it might be said that from the vantage point of Babylonian divination, the universe itself constituted a type of loosely construed dense sign system in which even the most mundane and minute details of the physical world could become semiotically relevant if exposed to the right analytical procedures.[169]

The mantic sign was not the only form of representation that might have been read from a semiotic perspective. In fact, Assyriologist Jean Bottéro has argued that Babylonian divination is based on and even derived from the underlying logic of cuneiform writing.[170] Cuneiform signs, much like mantic signs, constitute a type of multilayered symbol system that is "dense" with semiotic potential. In his analysis of the development of this script, Bottéro provides insights into the multiplicity of cuneiform sign functions.[171] For instance, while cuneiform was primarily pictographic in its earliest stages, it soon evolved in such a way that allowed signs to refer to

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[165] Bahrani, *The Rituals of War*, 81.

[166] Eadem, *The Graven Image*, 110. Interestingly, a similar system of logic also undergirds Mesopotamian medical texts and laws codes.

[167] As an example of the latter, an omen in the Assyrian Dream Book reads as follows: "If a man in his dream eats a raven (arbu): income (irbu) will come in." See ibid., 113.

[168] In other words, the mantic and the semiotic (and one might add, the somatic) were closely linked in the thought world of ancient Mesopotamia. Bahrani notes that by the seventh century B.C.E., at least ten thousand omens had been catalogued (*Rituals of War*, 64).

[169] Neither Bahrani nor Ginzburg uses the language of "dense" or "replete" sign systems. However, Bahrani says something similar when she notes that "for the ancient Mesopotamians, the world was saturated with signs; the world was a text" (ibid., 60).

[170] Jean Bottéro, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods* (trans. Zainab Bahrani and M. Van De Mieroop; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[171] For further discussion, see the following chapters in Bottéro's *Mesopotamia*: "From Mnemonic Device to Script," 67–86 and "Writing and Dialectics, or the Progress of Knowledge," 87–102. Bahrani briefly summarizes several of these observations in *The Graven Image*, 104–7.

things or ideas by means of synecdochic relationships or metonymic extensions. Eventually, cuneiforms signs also came to take on syllabic values through total or partial phonetic transfer (homonymy) between the signifier and the name of the signified in Sumerian, and then later, Akkadian.[172] Thus, not only could one sign refer to multiple ideas or even multiple phonemes, but so too could the same phoneme be represented by multiple signs.[173]

The polyvalence of this particular sign system increased even further when the cuneiform script was adapted for use with the Akkadian language. Since Akkadian utilized a number of phonemes that were otherwise unknown in Sumerian, such as laryngeals, sibilants, and emphatics, the same combination of signs could potentially refer to multiple Akkadian terms that were phonetically and semantically distinct.[174] Further still, there was some flexibility in terms of how scribes could divide and form syllables, thus making it possible to indicate the same term with multiple combinations and types of cuneiform signs.[175] The point of these observations is to affirm what any student of Akkadian already knows: the cuneiform writing system is an incredibly complex notational system that is replete with almost "unlimited possibilities for signification."[176] As a result, cuneiform signs, much like mantic ones, were never simply read—they were always deciphered in order to discern an encoded message with rich semiotic potential.

The analogy that I am attempting to draw between the nature of cuneiform and Goodman's theory about non-linguistic notational systems is certainly more suggestive than it is precise. Because the cuneiform script operates in quite different ways than the Roman alphabet, the individual signs in this system do not fully meet the criteria of being syntactically disjoint and differentiated.[177] Neither is it necessarily the case that ancient viewers

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[172] The shift toward phoneticization was likely the result of grammatical limitations, such as not being able to indicate parts of speech and/or difficulties involved with recording personal names.

[173] Bottéro, *Mesopotamia*, 90–91.

[174] For instance, the same signs *ka* + *pa* + *du* could be used to form the words *kapâdu* ("to plan"), *kabâtu* ("to be heavy"), and *kapâtu* ("to succeed"). See ibid., 92.

[175] There also existed some measure of vocalic fluidity such that the same sign, *mad*, could also be used to indicate the syllables *mid* and *mud*. However, these ambiguities were somewhat restricted through scribal conventions, literary contexts, and massive lists of signs and their readings.

[176] Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 114.

[177] The polysemous nature of cuneiform signs is not the only thing that distinguishes this notational system from the Roman alphabet. As Bahrani rightly notes, an alphabetic script "depends on the conceptual breakup of the sign/referent" (*The Graven Image*, 119). Even though cuneiform signs became more stylized and took on phonetic values through time, this sign system never became fully dislodged from its pictographic origins. Thus, Bahrani concludes that "in Assyro-Babylonian thought, images and words were never completely

saw mantic signs as containing the same type of "surplus of meaning" that Goodman assumes for works of art. Nevertheless, the underlying logic of Mesopotamian divination and textual exegesis suggests that it was customary for ancient viewers to approach some types of signs (though perhaps not all types) from what we might call a semiotic perspective. What I am suggesting is that the ability to read mantic and cuneiform signs, both of which might be said to be somewhat pictorial in nature, required a mode of analysis that was capable of discerning signifying structures that are replete with semiotic potential. In other words, these observations raise the possibility that a mode of reading (or seeing) was in effect in the ancient Near Eastern world that would have led viewers to read some images with a certain type of semiotic awareness.

There is, of course, no guarantee that *all* Mesopotamian viewers read images in this fashion. And these observations about mantic and cuneiform signs in Mesopotamian do not automatically apply to conventions of reading images in Northwest Semitic cultures and the southern Levant. Yet, in the absence of more explicit evidence concerning how Israelites would have understood the nature of non-linguistic signs, the perspective offered by Bahrani at least raises the possibility that some ancient viewers read some images beyond the level of iconography. In fact, if images did function anything like mantic or cuneiform signs, then it is conceivable to think that they, too, were thought of as polyvalent signs that were characterized by density or repleteness. By convention and habit, it might well have been the case that ancient viewers would have recognized and responded to elements of the visual arts that are not always explicitly addressed by the iconographic method.

Therefore, rather than being an anachronistic construct of contemporary visual theory, Goodman's understanding of non-linguistic systems might help biblical scholars be able to better conceptualize and describe how images signified in the ancient world. While it would be difficult to know for sure if, for instance, Mesopotamian Ishtar seals, Neo-Assyrian historical narratives, or the Persian period Behistun relief would have been understood by native viewers in the same ways as Bahrani, Winter, and Root suggest, the general orientation of their approach to visual analysis represents a plausible way of conceptualizing how images were read in ANE visual culture.

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separated" (Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 118). Rather, image and text, sign and signifier existed in a dialectic tension that does not fully adhere to Western understandings about linguistic sign systems.

4.4. The End of Iconography (as We Know it)

Throughout the course of this chapter, I have attempted to conduct a series of theoretical inquiries concerning the nature of pictorial signs and methods of visual analysis. From the outset, my goal has been to prompt biblical scholars to cultivate a more critical awareness of contemporary visual theory concerning how images signify and why non-linguistic sign systems express meaning in ways that are both like and not like linguistic notations. In doing so, I have not only tried to destabilize some of the assumptions that are operative in Panofsky's widely accepted iconographic method but I have also aimed to call into question if this approach to visual analysis—at least as we have come to know it through Panofsky and his followers—is fully adequate for discerning meaning in the visual arts. As an example of how a more semiotically-oriented approach to image analysis might shed new light on the meaning of ancient visual artifacts, I have explored how three aspects of visual representation—compositional design, the rhetoric of display, and the mode of signification—contribute to the construction of meaning, even though these visual features are not always emphasized in Panofsky's schema.

While the intersection of contemporary visual theory and the study of ancient art can be a fruitful area, this endeavor is beset with difficulties, not least of which are questions about whether it is anachronistic to apply twentieth-century semiotic theory to first-millennium B.C.E. visual culture. Though caution should certainly be used in this regard, I have attempted to show that at least some ancient Near Eastern viewers looked at and understood mantic and cuneiform signs in ways that share something in common with the sort of perspectives of Goodman, Winter, Baharani, and Root. The above reflections are by no means exhaustive in nature and neither do they address every possible issue in visual theory that might be relevant to methods of visual analysis. Nevertheless, by staging these brief, but crucial, encounters between visual analysis and visual theory, I hope to have initiated what will be an on-going conversation concerning the nature of images and their meaning. By way of conclusion, I highlight three specific ways in which these reflections might come to bear on a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies.

(1) It is important for biblical scholars to begin to see critical reflection on the nature of images and pictorial signs not as a parochial concern of the fine arts but rather as an integral component of biblical research. As has been demonstrated throughout this discussion, numerous issues in visual theory can directly impinge on the ways in which scholars understand how art was read and interpreted by ancient viewers. Toward this end, my analysis has attempted to surface what is only a small sampling of questions regarding the nature of visual representation. Each of the issues I raise above are intended to challenge the orienting perspectives and underlying

assumptions that guide traditional approaches to visual analysis in biblical studies.

By underscoring the importance of visual theory in image analysis, I do not mean to suggest that every contribution to iconographic exegesis should include an extended discussion of these or any other issues related to the nature of linguistic and non-linguistic signs. Indeed, practical considerations limit the scope of most studies, and at least in some cases, theoretical issues might best be left implicit. As a result, a more modest—and perhaps more realistic—proposal would be for biblical scholars to begin to develop fluency in a broader and more interdisciplinary range of scholarship related to visual analysis. While works by Keel, Uehlinger, and numerous other scholars associated with the Fribourg School should no doubt retain their canonical status within this field, much would be gained if biblical scholars also became conversant in the works of Goodman, Mitchell, Eco, Winter, Bahrani, and a host of others who scrutinize artistic representation with a greater awareness of theories pertaining to semiotics and visual culture. In so doing, biblical scholars would not only be able to benefit from the critical insights of visual theory but they also would be able to contribute in fruitful ways to what is an increasingly prominent conversation about visual data in other areas of the humanities and social sciences.

(2) More specifically, the above reflections should signal the need to revise the aims and expand the limits of iconography as a method of visual analysis in biblical studies. Here again, the extent of this proposal is quite modest. I do not mean to suggest that Panofsky's method should be altogether abandoned. In fact, identifying an image's basic subject matter or intrinsic content remains an invaluable part of many aspects of the comparative study of ancient art and biblical literature, including questions concerning image-text correlation, congruence, and contiguity (§3.2).

Neither do I propose to offer a ready-made template of visual analysis that can apply universally to all visual artifacts regardless of their historical and cultural location. Indeed, the sorts of theoretical concerns surfaced above do not apply equally well or in the same way to all images from within the same cultural context. In other words, while close scrutiny of an image's design, style, or mode of signification might yield fruitful results in certain cases, these aspects of visual representation might be less important—or at least less interesting—in other cases.[178] Instead, the goal of a visual hermeneutics is to reconsider operative assumptions and to raise new questions about how scholars think about, use, and analyze ancient art for the purposes of biblical interpretation.

[178] Indeed, the validity of any theoretical reflection is not contingent on it being fully relevant to every conceivable application. The proof of visual theory is in the eating of the pudding, as the saying goes, but there is much to prove, and not every batch of pudding can provide all the necessary evidence one might desire.

Specifically, this chapter has surfaced the need to update certain aspects of Panofsky's method in light of critical reflection on how it is that images create meaning beyond the level of iconography. In order to more fully account for the nature of images as a type of dense or replete sign system, I contend that at least one additional level of meaning should be included in Panofsky's schema. A revised and expanded version of Panofsky's schema might be conceptualized as in **fig. 4.7**. As a way of partially adopting Panofsky's terminology, I am inclined to call this level of interpretation "meta-iconographic analysis" insofar as it represents a stage of interpretation that should exist "alongside" or "with" traditional iconographic concerns.[179] Regardless of where this step is inserted in Panofsky's schema (I choose to place it before "iconological interpretation"), at this level one would consider issues related to the semiotic potential of an image's compositional design, rhetoric of display, and mode of signification.

While each of these issues need not be fully addressed in any given application of visual analysis, by intentionally incorporating such concerns into this widely accepted schema, I hope to challenge biblical scholars to raise and address issues of interpretation that are often underemphasized in Panofsky's method. To reiterate a point that I have tried to stress throughout this chapter, it is not so much that these visual elements are completely absent from Panofsky's schema—indeed, they tend to be found in the right-most column as "corrective principles." By shifting these elements to the left-most column and by adding an additional level of interpretive analysis, my revised method attempts to highlight how these features might be more systematically studied as objects of interpretation in their own right.

Practically speaking, the purpose of adding a new level of meaning to Panofsky's schema is to draw attention to aspects of visual representation that often go unnoticed or under-scrutinized in many other (but certainly not all) contributions to iconographic exegesis. To illustrate why this is so important it will be instructive to consider recent research in cognition and perception. Cognitive researchers have demonstrated that what we are thinking about—or indeed, what we are looking for—determines to a great degree what we actually see.

To illustrate this point, Harvard medical researcher Trafton Drew recently conducted an experiment in which he superimposed a one-inch tall

[179] In this sense, I draw on the meaning of the Greek preposition *meta* when used with the genitive case. In these situations, *meta* typically functions as a marker of placement ("among, beside"), association ("with"), or attendant circumstances ("alongside"). In contrast, when *meta* is used with the accusative case, it often functions as a marker of time ("after"). I do not wish to draw on this latter connotation since this additional level of analysis need not come after other steps have been taken.

Object of interpretation	Level of interpretation	Instrument of interpretation	Corrective principle of interpretation
primary or natural subject matter (forms and motifs)	pre-iconographic description	recognition of forms through practical experience	history of style (how forms and motifs are expressed)
secondary or conventional subject matter (themes and concepts)	iconographic analysis	knowledge of themes through literary sources	history of types (how themes or concepts are expressed)
non-linguistic subject matter (compositional design, rhetoric of display, mode of signification)	**meta-iconographic analysis**	**understanding of images as dense signs**	**history of pictorial signs (how non-linguistic elements are thought to signify)**
intrinsic content and symbolic value	iconological interpretation	understanding of meaning through culturally-conditioned principles	history of symbols

Figure 4.7. Summary of a revised and expanded version of Panofsky's method of image analysis.

picture of a gorilla on MRI scans that radiologists look at when diagnosing cancer patients.[180] The radiologists, who are highly trained at detecting and interpreting even the subtlest details of these images, were asked to look at the MRI scans in order to determine if cancer nodules were present. Afterward, the doctors were asked if they saw the picture of the gorilla superimposed on the MRI scan. Surprisingly, 83% of the radiologists had not. What this and other experiments like it suggest is that what researchers—even the mostly highly trained ones—are asked to look for or pay attention to (i.e., their operative methods) dramatically influences what they actually see and do not see.[181]

An analogy can be made between these experiments and Panofsky's method. As an approach to visual analysis, iconography directs researchers to focus on and look for particular aspects of an image: forms, motifs, basic subject matter, intrinsic content, and so forth. But, in narrowing a researcher's attention on these elements of visual representation, the iconographic method can potentially filter, or de-emphasize, other visual features. To be fair, things like composition design, rhetorical of display, and mode of signification are not exactly hairy gorillas. And it should be noted that at least some biblical scholars have, in fact, drawn attention to these and other aspects of visual representation that go beyond the level of iconography. Nevertheless, it matters what instructions—or methods—we give to researchers interested in visual data precisely because these instructions dramatically affect what they see, and thus what they think a given image means. By proposing a "meta-iconographic" level of image analysis, I simply wish to revise what biblical scholars are asked to look for when they examine ancient art.

(3) Finally, it would be instructive to consider some of the broader implications of the proposed theories and revised methods that I have offered above. At the most fundamental level, questions should be raised about the

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[180] Trafton Drew, Melissa Le-Hoa Vo, and Jeremy M. Wolfe, "The Invisible Gorilla Strikes Again: Sustained Inattentional Blindness in Expert Observers," *Psychological Science* (July 17, 2013): 1–6.

[181] Drew's experiment is based on an earlier study in which subjects are asked to watch a video of two teams of kids (half in white uniforms, the other half in dark uniforms) passing basketballs back and forth while weaving around each other. Before seeing the video, the subjects are asked to count how many times the white team passes the basketball (this is actually quite difficult due to the movement of the various players). Half way through the video, a person dressed in a gorilla suit walks onto the stage, pounds his chest, and leaves. Afterward, only 50% of the subjects report having seen the gorilla in the video, even though most of them accurately identify how many times the basketball had been passed by the white team. For further discussion of this and related experiments, see Christopher F. Chabris and Daniel J. Simons, *The Invisible Gorilla: And Other Ways Our Intuitions Deceive Us* (New York: Crown, 2010).

very terms used to describe the field of study that seeks to interpret the Bible in light of ancient art. In recent scholarship, "biblical iconography" and "iconographic exegesis" have both been widely employed as a way of characterizing research that integrates a particular mode of art historical analysis with more traditional approaches to biblical interpretation. In many ways, this terminology offers a more than adequate description of the orientation of visual analysis within most contributions to biblical studies. However, as suggested throughout this discussion, visual analysis should not be reduced to the identification of iconographic content, and furthermore, numerous other methods can fruitfully contribute to how scholars understand meaning in the visual arts. Using the term "iconography" to describe this sub-field within biblical studies might unnecessarily or even unwittingly imply that Panofsky's method is the *only* mode of analysis that a biblical scholar might employ. As a result, one wonders if a shift in vocabulary is in order.

One possible alternative would be "visual culture exegesis." This terminology has the advantage of being more non-committal in terms of naming a specific method of visual analysis, and, as such, it leaves open the question of what orientating interpretive approach a scholar might draw on when analyzing works of art. In comparison to "iconography" or "iconographic," the term visual culture also has the advantage of suggesting a broader field of study, one that includes the analysis of specific art objects (i.e., ancient *iconography*) as well as visuality and visual culture. In chapter 6 of this study, I consider how the field of iconographic exegesis might more explicitly incorporate these latter two concepts into its scope of research.

Despite these potential advantages, the term "visual culture exegesis" is not without its own problems. Most notably, this term lacks any reference to the specific type of text being interpreted, and indeed it might apply equally well to the use of images in the study of non-biblical materials. In a similar way, the related term "visual exegesis" is sometimes used in reference to the study of art objects that come long after the Bible and that attempt to interpret biblical themes in and through visual media.[182] Moreover, changing the terms we use to describe a field of study does not automatically lead to concomitant changes in methodological procedure or interpretive practice.

Nevertheless, if biblical scholars are to take seriously the notion that the meaning of ancient art is not exhausted once its iconographic content has been determined, then it will become increasingly expedient to talk about, describe, and conceptualize this field of study in ways that move away from a singular focus on Panofsky's method. In this way, the primary purpose of my reflections on the nature of images and pictorial representation

[182] This type of analysis is often carried out in studies concerned with "reception history."

has been to announce—and indeed, advocate for—the end of iconography, at least as we have come to know it in biblical studies. This would not result in a return to classical concerns about aesthetics, but rather the beginning of new, more critically engaged approaches to reading images and seeing texts.

Chapter 5

Animating Art: The Life of Images and the Implications of Visual Response

"Why do [people] behave as if pictures were alive, as if works of art had minds of their own, as if images had a power to influence human beings, demanding things from us, persuading, seducing, and leading us astray?"[1]

"Indeed, it seems to me that we should now be prepared to remove the evidence of phenomena like the animism of images from discussions of 'magic,' and that we should confront more squarely the extent to which such phenomena tell us about the use and function of images themselves and of responses to them."[2]

5.1. What is an Image? – Reviving the Question

What, exactly, is an image? Though philosophers, art historians, and even a few theologians have entertained this question, it is not often explicitly addressed in contributions to iconographic exegesis. And perhaps for good reason. This question might be regarded as being overly speculative, or conversely, too self-evident, to warrant inclusion in many studies.[3] Nevertheless, specifying what an image is plays a crucial role in the formation of a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies. In fact, in other areas of biblical research, comparable questions are routinely raised about the nature of *texts*. In handbooks on biblical exegesis and textual hermeneutics, biblical scholars typically ask "What is a text?" or at least acknowledge that how one

[1] W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 7.

[2] David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Visual Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), xxii.

[3] For a helpful survey of past approaches to related questions in art historical discourse, see David Summers, "Representation," in *Critical Terms for Art History* (ed. Richard S. Nelson and Robert Shiff; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 3–19; and W. J. T. Mitchell, "What is an Image?" *New Literary History* 15 (1984): 503–37.

answers this question has important implications for biblical research.[4] Much of the same might be said about the definition of images. If images are to be taken seriously as a primary source for biblical interpretation, then scholars must begin to revive questions about what images are and how viewers conceive of and respond to them.

Yet, answering these questions is not easy. The terms "image" and "imagery" are quite slippery, and scholars often use them to refer to a wide range of phenomena, including the graphic arts, mental thought, visual perception, or even verbal language.[5] Even if one adheres to the narrower understanding of an image as a created material object that uses lines, planes, dimensions, color, and so forth, to depict some real or imagined entity, this term can still encompass a rather broad array of representational practices.[6]

Thus, it is hardly surprising that biblical scholars who actually define what an image is do so only in the most general of terms. As a case in point, Izaak J. de Hulster describes an image as a form of "mediated representation."[7] By casting his net broadly, de Hulster offers a definition that can effectively enmesh a great variety of visual artifacts, including those constructed out of different media (canvas, clay, stone, paper, metal), designed

[4] However, it should be noted that these handbooks often conceptualize the nature of a "text" in vastly different ways. For instance, Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., considers the question "What is the text?" as the main concern of text criticism insofar as it tries to establish the most original or authentic textual witness (*From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1998]), 19–30. Anthony C. Thiselton raises this same question, but chooses instead to address it from the vantage point of literary and hermeneutical theory (*New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992], 55–79). A more theologically oriented approach is employed by Sandra M. Schneiders, who explores the meaning of the text as "Word of God" (*The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* [2d. ed.; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1999], 27–63). Within the field of iconographic exegesis, one might also note that Izaak de Hulster begins his treatment of biblical hermeneutics with an explicit discussion of "What is a text?" (*Iconographic Exegesis and Third Isaiah* [FAT 2/36; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009], 8–10).

[5] Among biblical scholars, Brent A. Strawn explicitly notes the problematic ambiguity (i.e., the "slipperiness") of terms such as image and imagery (Strawn, "Imagery," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings* [ed. Tremper Longman and Peter Enns; Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008], 306). For a more thorough appraisal of the various uses of terms such as "mental imagery," "perceptual imagery," and "verbal imagery," see Mitchell's essay, "What is an Image?"

[6] It should be noted that Mitchell prefers to use the term "picture" to refer to a specific kind of visual representation. In contrast, Mitchell reserves the term "image" for "the whole realm of iconicity," including non-pictorial imagery. For further discussion, see idem, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 4 n. 5. While Mitchell's distinction between image and picture can be helpful, I do not rigidly employ it throughout this study.

[7] De Hulster, *Iconographic Exegesis*, 48.

for various functions ("high" art, language of communication, apotropaic magic), and instantiated in diverse formats (monumental statuary, clay figurines, miniature seals, painted facades). In general, de Hulster's definition occasions little controversy. As such, I am tempted to stop here, leaving more theoretical speculation about the nature of images to philosophers and theologians.

Nevertheless, one particular aspect of de Hulster's definition bears further consideration. Namely, it is how he (and many others) construes the relationship between an image and its referent. In the course of his brief discussion about the nature of images, de Hulster explicitly affirms what most casual observers tacitly assume: what one encounters in an image (i.e., representation) is ontologically distinct from what one encounters in the thing or person an image depicts (i.e., reality). This is even true in situations where an image is made to naturalistically resemble its referent. For instance, legend has it that the ancient Greek artist Zeuxis painted a picture of grapes that was so realistic that birds would fly down to pick at the canvas. While this sort of painting might be lifelike enough to trick unsuspecting animals, the rational and astute human observer (presumably) knows that the picture is nothing more than a *trompe-l'oeil*, the product of an art technique used to construct an illusion of reality. In terms of their ontological status, Zeuxis's grapes are no more similar to real grapes than is the canvas upon which they are painted.

De Hulster's definition is based on a similar assumption. Whatever their form or function, images readily can be recognized as *representation*, and as such, they are not typically confused with the real presence of the things they depict—that is, *reality*.[8] In fact, the operative belief in this definition of images is that the very act of representation is predicated on the absence of the thing represented.[9] A viewer might read, analyze, contemplate, or admire a particular work of art, but she does so knowing full well that what she encounters is a representation of a thing that is somehow *not there*—that is, not present, but absent.[10] In this view, representation and reality are

[8] By "reality" I primarily mean that which exists outside of representation, though as will be seen later in this discussion (§5.2), this distinction is somewhat problematic. Though I am aware that the term "reality" might be no less slippery than "image," I occasionally employ it throughout this chapter as a shorthand way of referring to the entity that is pictured in a given art object, even if one might properly say that the picture does not provide a purely mimetic or historically accurate version of that reality.

[9] De Hulster contends that "an image exists in the tension of not being the thing represented and often, exactly because of its absence, representing it" (*Iconographic Exegesis*, 50).

[10] De Hulster is certainly not alone in drawing these conclusions about the nature of images. Almost any form of visual analysis—whether driven by iconographic, semiotic, or aesthetic concerns—regards images as a form of communication that conveys information about its referent, but does not embody the presence of the thing it represents.

ontologically distinct categories whose boundaries are stable and well defined.

Despite the rather commonsensical nature of this understanding, the history of visual response tells a slightly different story. Throughout time and across cultures, one finds countless examples of viewers who, on occasion, talk about and treat images as if they were something more than just works of art. Statues are fed and clothed, icons are prayed to and adored, paintings are wept over and worshiped, and symbols are used to ward off demons and manifest the presence of the gods. The modern reader might be inclined to dismiss such responses as the exclusive product of some ancient time and place. Yet, similar impulses persist today. In Iraq, soldiers stage dramatic iconoclastic spectacles against statues of political leaders. In Italy, firefighters risk their lives to save the mysterious Shroud of Turin. And just about everywhere, even the most hardened rationalists would have some qualms about tearing up a photograph of a loved one.

What do we make of the strange ways people behave around images? These responses would be difficult to explain if the viewers in question assumed that images were merely a form of "mediated representation" of a thing or person that was absent. What is striking about these and numerous other instances of image response is that people seem compelled to talk about and react to images as if they were living things. At least in the eyes of some observers, images come to possess a type of subjectivity and agency that enables them to act on their own, to influence the world, and to transgress the divide between representation and reality.

W. J. T. Mitchell is particularly interested in this variety of visual response. In his volume *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005), Mitchell revives the basic question about the nature of images not only by reconsidering its underlying premises, but also—and more literally—by restoring a sense of life to its answers. Through a series of case studies, Mitchell sets out to examine why images not only seem to produce "imitations of life" but also appear to take on "lives of their own." Mitchell sums up the goal of his study in the following way:

> The aim here is to look at the varieties of animation or vitality that are attributed to images, the agency, motivation, autonomy, aura, fecundity, or other symptoms that make pictures into "vital signs," by which I mean not merely signs *for* living things but *as* living things. If the question, what do pictures want? makes any sense at all, it must be because we assume that pictures are something like life-forms, driven by desire and appetites.[11]

Mitchell is certainly not the first to draw attention to the strange power that images seem to possess, but he, unlike most others, is unwilling to dismiss

[11] Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 6–7.

belief in this power as reflecting a type of primitive or naïve (and as some add, non-Western) "superstition" or "magic."[12]

One of the central claims Mitchell makes throughout *What Do Pictures Want?* is that the tendency to attribute a lifelike status or power to images is "not something that we 'get over' when we grow up, become modern, or acquire critical consciousness."[13] Mitchell insists that most people exhibit a type of "double consciousness" with respect to images that causes them to vacillate "between magical beliefs and skeptical doubts, naïve animism and hardheaded materialism, mystical and critical attitudes."[14] Thus, Mitchell wishes neither to defend nor discredit instances of visual response that attribute the status, power, and agency of living beings to works of art. Instead, he seeks to understand where these impulses come from, why they persist, and what they "tell us about the use and function of images themselves and of responses to them."[15]

Thus, what makes Mitchell's approach potentially helpful to biblical scholars is that it refuses to limit the study of images to the analysis of how pictorial signs function as a language of communication. Instead, Mitchell opens art criticism to the broader implications of how images structure human relationships, beliefs, and behaviors not only as works of art, but as *living things and social agents*. For Mitchell, what pictures want—and, I should add, what many biblical scholars have failed to give them—is to be defined and analyzed in ways that are "adequate to their ontology."[16]

Following Mitchell's lead, I want to revive fundamental questions about the life of images in the ancient world and to integrate more fully the implications of visual response into biblical research. In order to do so, I aim to expand and redirect Mitchell's work in at least two ways.

First, as provocative as Mitchell's case studies are, he does not develop terms and concepts that adequately account for the mechanisms by which images obtain their lifelike status. As a way of more fully explaining this phenomenon, I draw on the work of visual theorists David Freedberg and Alfred Gell, two of the most important figures in the study of the history and theory of visual response (§5.2). By more closely analyzing the power and agency of images, Freedberg and Gell significantly advance our understanding about how and why images seem to take on lives of their own in the eyes of so many observers.

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[12] Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 7.

[13] Ibid., 8. As an example, Mitchell recounts how one of his colleagues, when faced with students who were skeptical of the lifelike power of contemporary images, simply asked the class to cut out the eyes of a photographs of their mothers. Their reluctance to do so proved, at least in part, that these images were more than just artistic representations in the minds of the students (ibid., 9).

[14] Ibid., 7.

[15] Ibid., xxii; see also 30.

[16] Ibid., 47.

Second, Mitchell, like many other visual theorists, is primarily interested in contemporary art objects and modern day visual response. While his analytical perspective is compelling, an intentional effort must be made to demonstrate how—or even if—theories about the animation of art are pertinent to the study of ancient images and their relation to biblical texts. In order to begin to bridge this gap, I assess how Freedberg's and Gell's theories might shed new light on a certain type of image in ancient visual culture—namely, the *ṣalmu* (§5.3). In addition, I examine how a well-known type of visual response from ancient Mesopotamia—the theft and destruction of images in the context of war—is predicated on an intellectual tradition that presumes that representation and reality interact and intermingle on the same ontological plane.

Finally, I consider some of the practical implications of these theories, including how they might prompt biblical scholars to think differently not only about the analysis of specific art objects but also about the various types of image response found in the Hebrew Bible (§5.4).

5.2. The Life of Images in Visual Theory

In visual theory, two scholars—art historian David Freedberg and social anthropologist Alfred Gell—have made important contributions to how we understand the animation of art.[17] Both Freedberg and Gell effectively call into question the tendency in Western art theory and philosophy to consider representation and reality as ontologically disparate categories. Like Mitchell, they acknowledge that the history of visual response implies that viewers often treat images as if they were living things, capable of exerting their own power and agency over the realm of the real. However, unlike Mitchell, Freedberg and Gell attempt to more thoroughly explain the cognitive processes and social mechanisms that are responsible for prompting certain visual responses. Although the underlying premises behind their scholarship overlap considerably, Freedberg and Gell describe the animation of art from different theoretical vantage points. Specifically, while Freedberg addresses the power of images from an ontological perspective, Gell employs an anthropological approach in order to better describe the social agency many images seem to exert. Taken together, these theories provide a more robust conceptual framework for describing the animation of art and its implications for visual response.

[17] Freedberg, *The Power of Images*; and Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).

5.2.1. David Freedberg and the Power of Images

In his provocative study, *The Power of Images* (1989) David Freedberg explores a topic that is often overlooked in art historical research: the history and theory of visual response. In Freedberg's view, a critical examination of visual response would do more than just survey the history of aesthetic criticism or the development of art historical discourse.[18] Rather, Freedberg is interested in how everyday viewers and non-experts treat art objects and what their responses might imply about the power images have, both socially and psychologically. In particular, Freedberg is concerned with instances of visual response that seem to be predicated on a belief that what is represented *by* an image is actually present *in* the image itself. Without either resorting to vague discussions of "magic" or retreating to a position that acknowledges the power of images only as a particular symptom of some past time and place, Freedberg tries to provide adequate terms for thinking about and explaining the fact that throughout history, "our responses to images may be of the same order as our response to reality."[19] Put differently, Freedberg brings an ontological awareness to what images are and how they function in the register of the real.

Freedberg constructs his theoretical perspective from a series of inductive investigations of visual response. Of particular interest to Freedberg are instances in which viewers describe works of art as being capable of moving, hearing, seeing, touching, bleeding, and manifesting the presence of a deity or ancestor. Accounts such as these tend to strain the credulity of many modern observers. However, one of Freedberg's central claims is that these responses cannot be dismissed as evidence of a viewer's simpleminded belief in animism or lack of scientific rationality.[20] Nor is it the case that such descriptions are only a literary construct, the effect of using conventional metaphors and rhetorical tropes to talk about a realistic looking image "as if" it were a living thing. Rather, Freedberg regards these ways of talking about images as a "historical testimony to a cognitive fact."[21]

Therefore, it is in and through these strange responses to images that one can discern the contours of a particular way of conceptualizing the relationship between representation and reality. To ask if such images are *really* alive is to miss the point. What Freedberg attempts to show is that how people *really* act around images belies any rational assertion they might

[18] For instance, Freedberg cautions that "to limit the description of response in these severely historicizing ways and thus to define the 'causes' of response (for that is what is implicit in the endeavor) is often to restrict the audience of art in a manner unsupported by historical fact" (*The Power of Images*, 431).

[19] Ibid., 438.

[20] Freedberg describes animism as a catchall phrase used to refer to the belief that inert objects could be invested with life (ibid., 284).

[21] Ibid., 291–92.

otherwise make about images being nothing more than artistic representations. Thus construed, visual responses become a type of primary source for understanding how it is that certain observers conceive of the nature and status of artistic representation.

Perhaps the most persistent question that emerges in Freedberg's study is how art obtains its lifelike status in the first place. How does the signifier become "the living embodiment of what it signifies" and what processes inaugurate the transition from inanimate art to living presence?[22] In raising these issues, Freedberg recognizes that the animation of art is neither automatic nor indiscriminate. In fact, not all images are understood to manifest the presence of what they represent, and even those that do are typically thought to possess this power on the basis of exhibiting specific characteristics or going through certain processes of transformation.[23] While the finer points of these mechanisms surely vary from culture to culture and perhaps also from viewer to viewer, Freedberg identifies several underlying notions about what enables images to function as something more than just a mediated representation.

5.2.1.1. Mimeticism and Ontology

One widely recurring tendency among viewers is to attribute an ontological status to images that closely resemble the thing or person they represent. In these cases, the potential of an image to manifest the living presence of its referent is dependent on a mimetic form of representation. This association between ontological status and realistic appearance is often evident in religious imagery in which the desire to make the divine accessible to worshipers leads to the creation of particularly lifelike works of art.

For instance, throughout the Late Middle Ages artists made crucifixes in which the figure of Jesus was given a moveable head and arms, real hair, and even a bleeding wound (by means of connecting a vessel of fluid to the back of the statue).[24] The purpose of this manner of depiction was not simply to make an image that looked like the crucified Christ but rather to prompt viewers to talk about and use the image as, or indeed in place of, a real person. During liturgical dramas associated with the Passion, participants would carry these types of crucifixes in procession before taking the statue of Jesus down from the cross and placing his arms at his side. The participants would then wrap the statue in a shroud and/or lay it in the lap of an actor playing the part of the Virgin Mary. What is important to note is

[22]Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 28, 82.

[23] See especially the following chapters in *The Power of Images*: "The God in the Image," 27–40; "Consecration: Making Images Work," 82–98; and "Live Images: The Worth of Visions and Tales," 283–316.

[24] Ibid., 286.

that the ability to manipulate the statue in a realistic fashion enabled it to take the place of a human actor who otherwise would play the role of Jesus in the liturgical drama.[25] In these situations, the realistic way in which the Christ figure is depicted plays no small part in shaping the belief that the statue somehow transcended its status as an inanimate representation. Freedberg's point is not just that these statues looked real but that they effectively served as substitutes for human actors by virtue of their lifelike appearance.

Another curious example of this phenomenon involves classical legends about Daedalus. Numerous Greek writers contend that this mythical figure, who was considered to be an exceptionally skilled artisan (Δαίδαλος means "clever worker"), was able to produce statues that were so realistic in appearance that they were considered to have a lifelike status. Particularly revealing in this regard are the comments of the first century B.C.E. Greek historian, Diodorus Siculus:

> In the production of statues, [Daedalus] so excelled all other men that later generations preserved a story to the effect that the statues he created were exactly like living beings: for they say that they could see and walk, and preserved so completely the disposition of the entire body that the statue which was produced by art seemed to be a living being. Having been the first to render the eyes open, and the legs separately, as they are in walking, and also the arms and hands as if stretched out.[26]

Diodorus's remarks reflect a common way of thinking about how images obtain their ontological status. What is true of Diodorus's perspective is also true of those who created and used lifelike statues of Jesus in the Late Middle Ages: realism in art is not simply understood to be a means of imitating reality but rather is a way of manifesting the presence of the thing or person represented.

Biblical scholars occasionally express similar understandings about how idols come to life. In their research on idolatry, Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit argue that the Hebrew Bible only prohibits what semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce would classify as "iconic" or "similarity-based" images—that is, those that are made to resemble their referent in a naturalistic fashion.[27] Although Halbertal and Margalit do not address the thorny issue of how one could verify if an image of Yahweh was indeed made in

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[25] Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 286–88.

[26] Diodorus Siculus 4.76.1–3; translated in J. T. Pollitt, *The Art of Greece, 1400–1431 B.C.* (Sources and Documents in the History of Art; Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 5. As cited in Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 36–37.

[27] Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (trans. Naomi Goldblum; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), esp. 37–66. I discuss the work of Habertal and Margalit in more detail in §6.3.1.

his likeness, they nevertheless seem to assume that any anthropomorphic representation would fall into this category. In either case, they speculate that these types of "similarity-based" images are problematic precisely because they introduce "the possibility of a substitutive error, in which the idol ceases to be the representation or symbol of God and comes to be seen as God himself."[28] Thus, not unlike Freedberg, Halbertal and Margalit connect lifelike appearance with ontological status.

It follows that Halbertal and Margalit suggest that non-mimetic forms of representation, such as Yahweh's cherubim throne or the ark of the covenant, are permitted because they are related to their referent not by resemblance, but by associative or metonymic inference. The cherubim throne, for instance, implies the presence of Yahweh without explicitly depicting his likeness. In other words, Halbertal and Margalit conclude that the Hebrew Bible offers no strictures against these images based on the supposition that "God is not revealed in a metonymic representation to the degree that he is in one based on similarity."[29] It is only when metonymic representations are misconstrued as iconic ones that they become idols.

This sort of confusion might be evident in the controversy surrounding the golden calves that Jeroboam sets up in the sanctuaries at Dan and Bethel (1 Kings 12). Hebrew Bible scholars have long suggested that Jeroboam's golden calves were originally understood to be acceptable representations insofar as they were meant to depict Yahweh's pedestal in much the same fashion as the ark or cherubim throne in the Jerusalem temple.[30] However, when seen through the theological lens of the Deuteronomistic History, Jeroboam's golden calves are described as unacceptable idols because they are misconstrued as a type of similarity-based image that effectively took the place of Yahweh as the object of worship.[31] As will become more evident in the next chapter, similar assumptions underlie a good deal of recent scholarship on why "aniconic" representations of Yahweh were acceptable in ancient Israelite religion. Thus, even without referencing Freedberg, many Hebrew Bible scholars assume that an image's ontological status is closely associated with its anthropomorphic form. Whether or not ancient Israelite viewers would have made similar assumptions is another matter.[32]

Nevertheless, an image's lifelike status is not only or even always contingent on mimetic representation. Freedberg provides numerous examples in which the presence of a deity is thought to inhabit abstract art objects

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[28] Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, 41–42.

[29] Ibid., 48.

[30] See, for instance, Moses Aberbach and Leivy Smolar, "Aaron, Jeroboam, and the Golden Calves," *JBL* 86 (1967): 129–40.

[31] Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 49.

[32] In §6.3, I critique the widely attested view that aniconic and iconic forms of representation function in drastically different ways in religious visual culture.

that are anything but anthropomorphic in form. For instance, in ancient Greece, unshaped meteoric stones known as *baitulia* often functioned as cult objects in which the real presence of the deity was thought to dwell.[33] Similarly, *xoanon*, which are carved, plank-like statues made of wood or stone, likewise seem to have functioned as cult objects even though they were minimally figured.[34] Freedberg's examples also include more contemporary objects, such as the abstractly shaped *ndakó gboyá* masks, which the Nupe people of Nigeria believe manifest the presence of the ancestors.[35]

I would also add to this list two other items not explicitly mentioned by Freedberg but relevant to biblical research: unshaped standing stones known as *maṣṣēbōt* and the ark of the covenant. Since I evaluate the nature of "aniconic" visual artifacts in greater detail later in this study (§6.3), it will suffice for now to note that I agree with those biblical scholars who point out that these objects were thought to manifest the deity's presence in ways quite similar to more iconic images, such as cult statues.[36]

In all of these examples, the belief that the object could embody or even substitute for the real presence of the thing it represents is not predicated on mimetic representation. Nor is it a function of the image having an anthropomorphic form. The life of the image is conferred by other means and apart from its physical appearance.

5.2.1.2. Consecration Ceremonies

Apart from mimeticism or physical resemblance, how do images come alive? Freedberg points to the important role of consecration ceremonies in making an image "work" regardless of its mode of representation. These rituals are evident in contexts ranging from the neo-Platonist practice of theurgy to the modern day *nētra pinkama* ("eye-ceremony") of the Theravada Buddhists of Ceylon.[37] While particular aspects of these ceremonies

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[33] Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 37. The Greek word *baitulia* is derived from the story in Genesis 35:14–15 where Jacob sets up a pillar, or *maṣṣēbā(h)*, at the place where God had spoken with him. Jacob pours out a drink offering upon the pillar, anoints it with oil, and calls the place Bethel (see also Gen 28:17–18). For further discussion of aniconism in ancient Greece, see Milette Gaifman, *Aniconism in Greek Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[34] See, for instance, Freedberg, *The Power of Images,* 34–35, esp. n. 22.

[35] Ibid., 31.

[36] See, for instance, Mathias Delcor, "Jahweh et Dagon: ou le Jahwisme face à la religion des Philistins, d'après 1 Sam. V," *VT* 14 (1964): 136–54; and Patrick D. Miller and J. J. M. Roberts, *The Hand of the LORD: A Reassessment of the "Ark Narrative" of 1 Samuel* (JHNES; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

[37] Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 84–86.

vary, they all seem to be viewed as the means by which an image is transformed into the living embodiment of what it signifies.[38]

Most interestingly for our purposes is Freedberg's brief discussion of the Washing of the Mouth, or *mīs pî* ceremony, which is widely attested in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.[39] While space prohibits an extensive discussion of this ritual, it is important to note that this complex ceremony was believed to effect a change in the ontological status of the image itself.[40]

Ancient viewers—or at least, the ritual specialists who carried out the ceremony—looked upon the *mīs pî* ceremony as a ritual of transition in which an image, typically in the form of a cult statue, was transformed into a "pure epiphany" of the deity.[41] In order to emphasize this ontological transition, numerous aspects of the ceremony were designed to annul the

[38] Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 28.

[39] The Hebrew Bible does not explicitly mention the *mīs pî* ceremony. However, three texts—Judg 17:3, Dan 3:1–7, and Gen 35:14—reference what seem to be consecration rituals associated with the construction of divine images. Also potentially relevant is the second creation story (Genesis 2) in which God formed the *adam* from dust on the ground and then "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man [האדם] became a living being" (Gen 2:7). Although these rituals—if they indeed are called such—are not nearly as elaborate as the *mīs pî* ceremony, it is possible that a similar understanding about the animation of art is tacitly present in these descriptions. Furthermore, as I argue later in this chapter (§5.4), the idol parodies in Second Isaiah and Jeremiah seem to presuppose knowledge of the underlying logic of the *mīs pî* ceremony.

[40] For a more extensive discussion of the *mīs pî* ceremony, see Angelika Berlejung, "Washing the Mouth: The Consecration of Divine Images in Mesopotamia," in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. Karel van der Toorn; ConBOT 21; Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 45–72; and eadem, *Die Theologie der Bilder: Herstellung und Einweihung von Kultbildern in Mesopotamien und die alttestamentliche Bilderpolemik* (OBO 162; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998); Aylward M. Blackman, "The Rite of Opening the Mouth in Ancient Egypt and Babylonia," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 10 (1924): 47–59; Peggy Jean Boden, "The Mesopotamian Washing of the Mouth (Mis Pi) Ritual: An Examination of Some of the Social and Communication Strategies which Guided the Development and Performance of the Ritual which Transferred the Essence of the Deity Into the Temple Statue" (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1998); Michael B. Dick, ed., *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Creation of the Cult Image* (ed. Michael B. Dick; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1999); idem, "The Mesopotamia Cult Statue: A Sacramental Encounter with Divinity," in *Cult Image and Divine Representation in the Ancient Near East* (ed. Neal H. Walls; ASOR 10; Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2005), 43–67; Christopher Walker and Michael B. Dick, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Mīs Pî Ritual* (SAA 1; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Institute for Asian and African Studies, University of Helsinki, 2001); and Thorkild Jacobsen, "The Graven Image," in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (ed. Patrick D. Miller, Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 15–32.

[41] Berlejung, "Washing the Mouth," 72.

earthly origins of the cult statue and affirm that it was the exclusive product of the gods. For instance, the ceremony itself includes a ritual performance in which the priests would symbolically bind and cut off the hands of the craftsmen in order to signify that the statue was not made by humans. Later in the ceremony, Mesopotamian scribes claim that the image was born in heaven.[42] At that point, the cult statue ceases to be called an "image" and instead is called an *ilu* (god) and/or is addressed by the name of the deity it represents. The priests secure the image's perfect purity through a mouth-washing procedure and then "activate" the statue's senses by opening its mouth. Only at this stage is the image ready to be set up in its rightful place in the temple.

Thereafter, the image is treated as an animate being—it is regularly bathed, fed, dressed, crowned, anointed, and prayed to. It is, in a sense, afforded full status as a social being.[43] In this way, the humanly created statue is transformed into, or indeed, birthed as, a living deity—that is, an image that embodies the real presence or essence of the god itself.[44]

Despite the important role that these ceremonies play in vivifying images in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, Freedberg also notes examples in which images seem to exhibit life *prior to* or even *apart from* such conse-

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[42] In Mesopotamian texts, the verb *(w)alādu* is used to refer to the creation of the cult statue. While this verb can mean to "make or craft," its more literal sense ("to give birth") seems to be in view in light of the theological perspectives that undergird this ritual. For further discussion of this point see Benno Landsberger, ed., *Brief des Bischofs von Esagila an König Asarhaddon* (Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche, 1965), 24–25 n. 38.

[43] Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 83.

[44] Terms such as "real presence" and "essence" are, admittedly, slippery philosophical terms, and as such, their application to ANE visual representation is somewhat tenuous. The term "real" is particularly problematic because, as I mentioned earlier, modern Western notions surrounding the bifurcation of representation and reality do not readily apply to ANE ontology. In a similar way, there seems to be no clear concept of "essence" in ANE anthropology, or at least their sense of a person's or deity's essence is far more pluridimensional and fluid than what is typically implied by this term in English. Thus, in using the terms "real presence" and "essence" to talk about the animation of art in ANE visual culture I urge caution in too readily transferring modern Western notions of these terms to ANE contexts. Nevertheless, given these limitations "real presence" and "essence" still seem to be apt terms for describing ANE beliefs about how the deity came to indwell a cult statue. Indeed, these terms are used by many scholars who have advanced research on the *mīs pî* ceremony, including Boden who uses "essence" ("The Mesopotamian Washing of the Mouth [Mis Pi] Ritual"), Dick who uses "real presence" ("A Sacramental Encounter with Divinity"), and Bahrani who uses both "real" and "essence" (*The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* [Archaeology, Culture, and Society series; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003]; and *Rituals of War: The Body and Violence in Mesopotamia* [New York: Zone Books, 2008]). Whatever terms are used to describe this phenomenon, it is clear that ancient Mesopotamians believed that the *mīs pî* ceremony transformed an inert statute into a living god.

cration ceremonies.[45] In elaborating on this point, Freedberg draws upon the work of Hans Georg Gadamer, who also comments on the ontological status of art, though not in reference to the *mīs pî* ceremony. Gadamer contends that "the public act of consecration or unveiling which assigns to [a work of art] its purpose does not give it its significance. Rather it is already a structure with a signifying-function of its own."[46] Gadamer seems to imply that rather than simply endowing an image with life, consecration ceremonies recognize, sanctify, or even enhance a potentiality already inherent in the image itself.[47]

Something similar is true in the case of the *mīs pî* ceremony. Although the mouth-opening procedure is crucial, it does not provide the first link between the deity and the image. The image, in fact, seems to have a certain "god potential" from the outset insofar as the gods are said to have controlled the choice of the workers involved and ordained the specific time and place for the image to be born. Furthermore, the materials used to construct the cult statue were thought to have an intimate connection with the heavenly realm. The preferred material for making cult statues, wood from the *mēsu*-tree, is sometimes referred to as "the flesh of the gods" (*šīr ilī*).[48] Thus, in a certain sense, the wood of the statue embodies the divine essence even before it is fashioned into a cult statue.[49] In light of this further insight into the *mīs pî* ceremony, I follow Freedberg in understanding

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[45] Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 83.

[46] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (repr. ed.; New York: Continuum, 2006 [1960]), 137.

[47] Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 92. It should be noted that Gadamer's theory effectively draws a distinction between how relics and images work. Though both are visual objects, only images obtain their ontological status by virtue of being figured or shaped, even if in an abstract or non-anthropomorphic manner. However, the efficaciousness of images and relics are, in many cases, closely tied together. For instance, in addition to discussing consecration ceremonies, Freedberg also notes that the animation of an image is sometimes achieved by concealing symbols, tokens, or relics of the deity within the image itself. This practice, which is based on the logic of sympathetic magic, is often on display in instances where relics of Christ, the Virgin, or the saints are placed within other images. Freedberg contends that this practice is based on "a fundamental sense of the peculiar and specific effectiveness of a substance or object placed within an image and believed to be in sympathy with what it represents" (ibid., 94). Thus, even if Gadamer is right to suggest that images and relics work in different ways, it is nevertheless the case that they are often thought to work together to animate a given art object.

[48] Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, "What Goes in is What Comes Out: Materials for Creating Cult Statues," in *Text, Artifact and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion* (ed. Gary M. Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis; BJS 346; Providence: Brown University Press, 2006), 6.

[49] Hurowitz makes the following point: "When made into a statue [the *mēsu*-tree] does not change its essence in the least. The new statue is not a new entity but a transformation or metamorphosis of a previously existing divinity. The statue, which we might consider a new god, was in fact always a god and it remains one" (ibid., 13).

consecration ceremonies as demonstrating, and to a certain extent actualizing, the ontological potential of certain images or materials to function as the real presence of the thing or person they represent. Freedberg sums up the matter this way: "Images work *because* they are consecrated, but at the same time they work *before* they are consecrated."[50]

My point in engaging this aspect of Freedberg's visual theory is not to establish any one single mechanism by which images come to embody the power and presence of their referent. In fact, in some of the examples discussed above it is clear that multiple explanations can be at play at the same time. Rather, the more important point I want to stress is the tendency of images to come to life for their viewers. This, after all, is Freedberg's central claim. By examining the history of visual response, it is clear that viewers not only look to images as a language of communication but they also relate to them as living things, capable of structuring human responses and ordering social interactions.

In the end, Freedberg provides the biblical scholar less with an exhaustive theory of the animation of art and more with an analytical orientation to the implications of visual response, whether in ancient or modern contexts.[51] In this brief discussion, I have already begun to highlight points of connection between Freedberg's theoretical interests and various aspects of ancient Near Eastern visual culture. I will return to this latter topic in more detail momentarily, but for now it is necessary to expand Freedberg's theoretical framework by taking up a related, but conceptually distinct, approach to explaining the animation of art.

5.2.2. Alfred Gell and the Agency of Art

In his posthumously published volume, *Art and Agency* (1998), Alfred Gell moves away from traditional approaches to the meaning of images, but in ways that are slightly different than Freedberg.[52] Instead of stressing the ontological status images are afforded in and through visual response, Gell

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[50] Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 98; emphasis his.

[51] Freedberg disavows any interest in providing an overarching theory of visual response. He contends that "if readers expect a specific theory of response to emerge by the end of the book, they will be disappointed, especially if by 'theory' is meant a fully explanatory theory, one that will in principle take care of all cases. The aim, instead, has been to develop adequate terms, and to set out the possibilities for the ways in which cognitive theory may be nourished by the evidence of history" (ibid., xxii).

[52] Gell prepared a full draft of this book and left notes that described revisions, which he unfortunately never had time to implement himself. As a result, the present version of the book can only be said to approximate what Gell might have intended for the final form of his research. For further discussion, see the foreword offered by Nicholas Thomas in *Art and Agency*, vii–xiii.

seeks to develop what he calls an "anthropology of art." What makes Gell's approach "anthropological" is not that he simply acknowledges the fact that aesthetic responses and visuality are culturally constructed phenomena, though he agrees with other scholars who endeavor to make this very point.[53] Rather, Gell wishes to put forward a theory about art that is itself anthropological in nature—that is, one that considers art objects as social agents within a network of relationships.[54]

In this view, works of art are treated much like human beings, though not so much because they are endowed with a lifelike status (which is closer to Freedberg's position) but rather because viewers attribute causality and intentionality to them.[55] What this means is that Gell conceives of art objects as occupying positions within social systems that are typically reserved for human agents.[56] Seen from this vantage point, an anthropology of art can help make sense of the strange ways people respond to images by positing that material objects can participate in and structure interactions between other agents.[57] Thus, while images are not strictly speaking alive, they can function as and substitute for living things within certain social contexts.

5.2.2.1. Index and Agency

Critical to Gell's anthropological approach to art is his understanding of two key concepts: index and agency.

Gell uses index as a technical term for a variety of art objects and images. He adapts this terminology from the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce. For Peirce, an index is a "natural sign" from which the viewer can make a causal inference, or abduction, about the thing signified. This inference is not based on either iconic resemblance or symbolic convention. Rather, the index is a gestural mode, a way of signaling the presence of an otherwise absent signified. The classic example involves the relationship of smoke and fire. Peirce considers smoke to be an index of fire because in most cas-

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[53] See, for instance, Lee Baxendall, ed., *Radical Perspectives in the Arts* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1972); Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Jeremy Coote, "Marvels of Everyday Vision: The Anthropology of Aesthetics and the Cattle Keeping Nilotes," in *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics* (ed. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton; New York: Routledge, 1992), 266–75; Howard Morphy, "Aesthetics is a Cross-Cultural Category," in *Key Debates in Anthropology* (ed. Tim Ingold; New York: Routledge, 1996), 255–60; and Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz, eds., *Visualizing Anthropology* (Bristol, Eng.: Intellect, 2005).

[54] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 4.

[55] Ibid., 122.

[56] Ibid., 9.

[57] Ibid., 11.

es one can plausibly infer that smoke is a natural outcome of fire. As suggested above (§5.2.1.1), some biblical scholars also consider Yahweh's cherubim throne to be an index insofar as it indirectly signals Yahweh's presence.[58]

In *Art and Agency*, Gell slightly reworks Peirce's semiotic understanding of the index to make it more compatible with his anthropological approach. Rather than being a natural outcome of a physical phenomenon or an indirect signal of an absent referent, Gell defines an index in social terms. Specifically, an index is a *social outcome* of a pattern of behaviors and perspectives generated within a certain anthropological system. In Gell's view, any type of image, even those based on natural resemblance or cultural convention, can thus function as an index of social relationships.[59] For example, most scholars would categorize an anthropomorphic cult statue as a type of "icon" in Peirce's system. However, for Gell, when such an image is worshiped and cared for in a temple setting, it not only serves as an index of the deity's agency (i.e., it signals the deity's ability to bless, curse, cause famines, initiate wars, abandon cities, etc.) but it also signals real social interactions among its worshipers (i.e., the effort humans make to interact with the deity by clothing, feeding, washing, and protecting the cult object).

Gell's use of the term index is at times uneven, and in general he does not sufficiently delineate its parameters. Nevertheless, it is clear that Gell develops this term as a shorthand way of referencing how an anthropological approach to art makes inferences about the status of images from the nature of visual response. To put the matter simply, just as a semiotician (or anyone else, for that matter) would infer the existence of fire from the appearance of smoke, a social anthropologist would infer the existence of social agency from observing how viewers respond to and talk about an image.

Gell's notion of the art index is closely linked to his understanding of agency. For Gell, agency is an attribute of persons or things who/which are seen as "initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of mind or will or intention, rather than the mere concatenation of physical events."[60] In Gell's view, agency is simply a culturally prescribed way of talking about causation and intentionality within a network of social relationships.[61]

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[58] See, for instance, Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 48–49. Tryggve N. D. Mettinger seems to maintain a similar understanding of the indexical nature of so-called "aniconic iconography," including the cherubim throne and ark (*No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context* [ConBOT 42; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1995], 20–24.

[59] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 15.

[60] Ibid., 16.

[61] Ibid., 17.

While agents are most often human beings, this need not be the case. Social anthropologist Bruno Latour argues that it is possible to conceive of sacred beings such as gods, spirits, and ancestors as social agents if humans attribute to them the power to alter a state of affairs in the world or to influence real interactions between human actors.[62] Gell extends this idea to material objects. In this way, dolls, cars, relics, sculptures, paintings, or any other host of inanimate objects can function as agents as long as they are understood to be the source or origins of causal events.[63]

A very basic example of this phenomenon can be seen in the way in which people talk about (or to) their automobiles. It is not uncommon to hear someone say something to the effect of "My car just didn't want to start this morning" or "It (or even he/she) let me down again." In these cases, while the speaker does not actually believe that her car is a living thing, she nevertheless speaks and acts in ways that suggest that the car has a human-like mind, will, or intention. To use Gell's terminology, one might infer a certain type of social agency for the car based on how it is treated and talked about as the cause of specific events or circumstances.

Gell emphasizes that there is no "as if" in such examples—the car *does* have real social agency in terms of how it structures and motivates human speech and responses. To be sure, this agency is initially bestowed by human actors and thus is not an inherent property of the car (or any other object). Nor is the agency of objects of the same order or of the same kind as human agency. In fact, Gell readily admits that the agency of humans and the agency of (art) objects are different. He refers to them as primary and secondary agents, respectively, so as to recognize the obvious fact that art objects are not agents in the sense of being morally responsible or cognitively sentient beings.[64]

Nevertheless, one of the central notions of Gell's theory is that from a strictly anthropological point of view, a work of art and a human being can both exhibit a type of functional social agency in a network of relationships. This means that the agency of art is never self-sufficient or independent of social contexts or other social agents. In order for any object to function as an agent, it must act with respect to a human associate, or "patient," that is causally affected by the agent's action.[65] In the examples above, a car does not have agency apart from those people who respond to it as a social agent. As a result, the type of agency Gell has in mind is an inferential category that attempts to describe the social function of an inanimate object in light of human responses and behaviors.

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[62] For further discussion, see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005).

[63] For further discussion, see Gell, *Art and Agency*, 16–23.

[64] Ibid., 20–21.

[65] Ibid., 22.

Even though Gell would admit that an object's agency is a projected or imputed agency that ultimately originates with human actors, it is nevertheless the case that how those human actors interact with the object implies that the object has the capacity to induce certain effects or responses that are typically associated with other human actors. For Gell, saying that an art object has agency is simply a way of describing an anthropological situation in which humans talk about, interact with, and respond to inanimate objects as they would with other human actors. Thus in Gell's theory, agency is not an ontological category but rather a social or relational one.

On this score, an important distinction emerges between Gell's theory and that of Freedberg and Mitchell. Gell ultimately is more concerned with analyzing an image's social effects while Freedberg and Mitchell tend to speak of an image's ontological status or essence. This distinction is important because it potentially mitigates the implausibility of seeing an image as an independent form of life—a point one might criticize with respect to Freedberg's or Mitchell's theories.

5.2.2.2. Mechanisms of Social Agency

Much like Freedberg, Gell is interested in how art gains its agency in the first place. He contends that there are two mechanisms or strategies by which an image is converted into a social agent: an externalist strategy and an internalist strategy.

In the first means of deriving agency, which Gell refers to as the "externalist strategy," an image becomes endowed with agency when human patients "simply stipulat[e] for it a role as a social other" in a relational network.[66] This mechanism of agency is said to be "external" since the object's agency is not a function of the internal properties of the image itself—that is, its physical form or substance. Rather, the externalist strategy requires that an art object obtain agency by means of being inserted into a particular social milieu.

For instance, when a statue of a deity is set up in a temple and procedures are established for taking care of it like a living being, the statue effectively enmeshes human participants in a social exchange that both implies and confers agency on both the deity and the worshipers. By virtue of installing the statue within the cultic operation of the temple and its personnel, the statue becomes an agent that can generate and structure real, physical interactions with various patients (worshipers, priests, etc.).[67] Converse-

[66] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 133.

[67] In this sense, Gell's externalist strategy of agency might be said to overlap with certain aspects of Freedberg's theory, especially its emphasis on the role of consecration ceremonies in the attribution of life to images. For instance, these ceremonies might be thought of as initiating a process by which an image takes on the role as a social being within a net-

ly, if the cult image is removed from this social context (i.e., the temple), say by theft or cultic reform, its agency, at least of the externalist variety, would be defused.

Since neither the material nor the form of the cult statue is an essential component of its agency in the externalist strategy, cultic operations in the above scenario readily can be restored if a replacement statue is provided. There is some evidence that this, in fact, happened in ancient Mesopotamia. When Sennacherib removed the statue of Nanā from Uruk, it seems that the priests of the local cult soon after fashioned a replacement statue, effectively restoring the cult to its normal operation. In fact, the statue stolen by Sennacherib was itself a replacement, since the original statue had been in exile in Elam for over 1600 years according to the annals of Ashurbanipal.[68] Even though there continued to be a strong desire among the conquered people for the repatriation of the original statue, perhaps for historical or sentimental reasons, the effective operation of its religious cult was not contingent on the return of the stolen object. The fact that the new statue could take on the same role in the social matrix of temple worship as the original statue suggests that its agency is strictly (or mostly) a function of an externalist strategy.

Gell refers to the second means of deriving agency as an "internalist strategy." This mechanism stipulates that the form and shape of an image matters in terms of how that image is perceived to function as an agent in a given social network. The internalist strategy depends on a general analogy between the array of intra-subjective relationships assumed for human beings (i.e., an exterior body implies an internal mind/self) and the physical form of an art object. As the logic goes, the internal mind/self of an art object, such as a statue, cannot be seen, but its presence can be implied by the existence of certain features that are analogous to the human body.[69] While this mind/body analogy is not contingent on any strict sense of mimetic realism in terms of how the art object is rendered, the internalist strategy does require that the image exhibit certain anthropomorphic features, such as eyes, ears, a nose, and a mouth, that facilitate the analogy between art and human being.[70]

Gell especially focuses on the importance of the eyes as an index of "interiority"—that is, the possession of a mind or soul that is capable of causation and intentionality. For instance, Gell concludes that "the particular attention paid to the eyes of [cult statues] arises not from the need to repre-

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work of relationships. However, Freedberg does not explicitly make this point. In fact, Freedberg's point seems to be that the consecration ceremonies effect a change in an image's ontological status, not its social function.

[68] Mordechai Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah, and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries B.C.E.* (SBLMS 19; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1974), 34.

[69] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 136.

[70] Ibid., 135.

sent the body realistically, but from the need to represent the body in such a way as to imply that the body is *only* a body, and that a much more important entity, the mind, is immured within it.[71] Thus, from the vantage point of the internalist strategy, an image's eyes are an outward manifestation of an implied internal mind/self.[72]

A similar perspective might be at work in the consecration ceremonies mentioned above (§5.2.1.2). While the particulars of these ceremonies vary over time and place, they almost always entail the manipulation of a statue's facial features—washing the mouth, opening the eyes/mouth, or even fashioning pupils (which is often accomplished by inserting a precious stone or dot of black ink in the middle of the eye). In the Mesopotamian *mīs pî* ceremony, the opening of the statue's mouth represents the decisive moment in the process by which the deity comes to animate the image's material form. In fact, the incantation texts associated with this ceremony make it clear that the opening of the mouth is essential to the image coming to life: "This statue without its mouth opened cannot smell incense, cannot eat food nor drink water."[73] The logic here seems to be consistent with Gell's internalist strategy insofar as the cult statue's subjectivity and agency is inferred on the basis of the existence and activation of certain external features. Quite literally, the statue's eyes and mouth function as a window (or index) to its soul.

Gell's internalist and externalist strategies are not mutually exclusive mechanisms for conferring social agency. In fact, both processes seem to work together with anthropomorphic cult statues in the ancient Near Eastern world. While these statues are activated or enlivened through ceremonies that focus on the eyes and mouth (a process reflective of an internalist strategy), the agency conferred in this fashion is not permanent. As discussed above, if such a statue is removed from its social matrix, its agency can be reassigned to a replacement statue. This latter process is reflective of an externalist strategy of agency.

Neither is the internalist strategy always a sufficient condition for conferring agency. As I discuss in chapter 6, there is ample evidence that non-anthropomorphic symbols associated with the deities (such as a winged sun disk, a spade, etc.) could also be objects of worship in ancient Mesopota-

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[71] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 136.

[72] A similar notion is evident in the Hebrew Bible as well. Since biblical authors (and many of their ANE counterparts) did not have a fully developed sense of the human brain, they tended to associate the eye with the capacity of thought and knowledge (cf. Jer 5:21; Num 15:24). In addition, the eye can be used to talk about an individual's inner being and spiritual faculties, including character (Ps 22:9), arrogance (Isa 2:11), humility (Job 22:29), mockery (Prov 30:17), desire (Deut 12:8), temptation (Job 31:1), and so forth. In this sense, the eye is closely connected to the heart/mind/self.

[73] This part of the incantation is best preserved in the Sultantepe tablet STT 200, lines 43–44. See Dick and Walker, "The Induction of the Cult Image," 99.

mia. In these cases, it seems that social agency is strictly a product of an externalist mechanism since, in the absence of anthropomorphic features such as eyes, ears, a mouth, etc., it would be more difficult to imply the presence of an internal mind/self. One might conclude from this observation that the externalist strategy can apply to any type of art object while the internalist strategy only applies to perceptual art—that is, images that attempt to represent their referent in a more naturalistic (or in the case of ANE cult statues, anthropomorphic) fashion. Although Gell does not explicitly make this point, the association of the internalist strategy with perceptual art seems to follow logically from his theory.

However, ANE visual practices suggest a more complicated situation. In certain cases, mouth-washing (*mīs pî*) and mouth-opening (*pīt pî*) consecration ceremonies were performed on abstract symbols, such as in the case of the *uskāru* crescent of the moon god.[74] These situations might suggest that the *mīs pî* ceremonies also play a role in the externalist mechanism insofar as they inaugurate/affirm the role of the symbol as an actor in the social network of temple worship. Alternatively, these situations might imply that the internalist strategy is not strictly contingent on a certain mode of artistic representation (e.g., anthropomorphism) since even abstract symbols can be thought to have an internal mind/self. In either case, ANE visual practices suggest that internalist and externalist strategies overlap in complex—and sometimes complementary—ways.

On the whole, Gell offers useful terms and concepts that can help shed new light on how and why art objects obtain subjectivity and agency in the eyes of many observers. However, Gell's theory is often difficult to penetrate and, perhaps for this reason, is far less often cited than Freedberg's *The Power of Images*. Nevertheless, Gell's anthropological approach has certain advantages. By framing the power of images in terms of social agency and actor-network theories, Gell connects his theoretical framework with a broader body of literature in the field of social anthropology. In addition, Gell's theory seems to apply to a wider-range of material artifacts than does Freedberg's theory, especially since the external strategy of agency is not contingent on a specific mode of signification (e.g., perceptual art). In this respect, Gell's externalist and internalist strategies might prove to offer a more useful explanatory mechanism when it comes to analyzing the various aniconic representations mentioned in the Hebrew Bible.

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[74] Tallay Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol: Pictorial Representation of Deities in Mesopotamia and the Biblical Image-ban* (OBO 213; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 109. cf. Dick and Walker, *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth*, 71.

5.2.3. Application to Iconographic Exegesis

Through this brief discussion, I have attempted to elucidate how Freedberg and Gell approach questions surrounding the life of images and the implications of visual response in slightly different ways. On the one hand, Freedberg contends that the animation of art is predicated on a belief that signifier and signified can become ontologically fused in the mind of the viewer. The result is that an image is not merely believed to symbolically represent its referent but is actually thought to manifest the presence or essence of the person/thing it represents. On the other hand, Gell explains the lifelike quality of images not in terms of art's ontological status but rather its anthropological function. In Gell's perspective, an image comes "alive" when it generates and structures social interactions in much the same way as a human agent would.

Despite these different approaches, Freedberg and Gell ultimately share the same goal: explaining why it is that viewers so often talk about and treat images as if they were animate things. In this way, these scholars not only bring increased attention to the history and theory of visual response but they also directly respond to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter about the nature and status of images.

Despite their utility and insight, these theories have yet to be appropriated for the methods and practices of iconographic exegesis, let alone other areas of religio-historical research. To some degree, this is understandable. Neither Freedberg nor Gell deal extensively with ancient art, and only on occasion do they explore the implications of visual response for religious belief and practice. But even if Freedberg and Gell had dealt more explicitly with ancient religious visual culture, it is quite possible that at least some (and maybe quite a few) biblical scholars would be reticent to apply their work to iconographic exegesis.

In my view, the potential disconnect occurs at the level of methodology. For the most part, Freedberg and Gell downplay traditional iconographic concerns (at least in the two volumes mentioned above), and as a result, they devote little attention to identifying the subject matter, symbolic meaning, and historical precedents of given images—that is, questions about the original production of visual artifacts. Instead, they focus on the implications of how images mediate social relationships and structure various types of responses in certain viewers.

There can be no doubt that issues pertaining to visual response are difficult to track when dealing with ancient artifacts. The contemporary researcher cannot conduct surveys of or interviews with ancient viewers so as to compile an in-depth and first-hand portrait of visual responses to certain art objects. On the other side of the equation, the sort of "data collection" that can be done with respect to ancient visual response would not exactly meet the standards of most contemporary ethnographic or social-scientific

methods. At best, a scholar of ancient art and religion has to rely on indirect, comparative, and, at times, analogical evidence when attempting to draw informed conclusions about patterns and implications of visual response in a given setting. These challenges should, indeed, be taken seriously, and the conclusions one draws about ancient visual response might thus be thought to be somewhat tentative or provisional.

This is perhaps why production-oriented research is often thought to be on safer methodological footing within iconographic exegesis. Yet, much of what is said about inquiries into the nature of ancient visual *response* might also be said about inquiries into the nature of ancient visual *production* (e.g., an image's provenance, history of style, content, and intended message). The contemporary researcher can no more interview or survey an ancient image's original author than she can its subsequent viewers. In fact, inquiries into iconographic content also primarily rely on indirect, comparative, and, at times, analogical evidence. As such, conclusions about visual production are often no less tentative or provisional than those about visual response and reception. And further still, it should be noted that inquiries into visual production *and* visual reception both constitute modes of historical analysis insofar as they use available evidence, whether direct or indirect, to reconstruct accounts of how and why and by whom images were produced and used in the past.

Insofar as this is true, one should remain skeptical of those who imply that historical-critical approaches to ancient art should only be interested in questions about production. In fact, the study of visual response, reception, and signification can function as a way of anchoring production-oriented studies to contextual concerns about how specific viewing communities processed visual data. In other words, a concern for authors/producers is not inherently more historical (or critical, for that matter) than a concern for readers/viewers. Conversely, concern for readers/viewers need not be ahistorical and certainly not uncritical. Scholars do best, then, not to choose between production-oriented and viewer-centered approaches but to proceed with both.

Thus, even though there are very real challenges faced in the study of ancient visual response and reception, they do not warrant the exclusion of such considerations from a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies. My primary purpose in engaging theories from Freedberg and Gell is to prompt scholars to expand their analytic perspective beyond traditional concerns with production and to study images in a way that takes more seriously the implications of visual response, including what these responses might imply about the ontology and social agency of art in specific historical contexts. In the next two sections of this chapter (§§5.3–4), I more explicitly demonstrate how Freedberg's and Gell's theories can shed new light on—and be further informed by—an analysis of ancient visual artifacts and their potential relation to Israelite religion and the Hebrew Bible.

5.3. Visual Response and Ancient Visual Culture

My discussion thus far has attempted to reevaluate issues surrounding the fundamental question, *what is an image*? While it is helpful to generally understand an image as a form of mediated representation, some contemporary visual theorists, such as Mitchell, Freedberg, and Gell, contend that this sort of definition does not adequately account for the history of visual response.

In numerous different contexts both past and present, viewers have tended to talk about and treat visual representation in ways that suggest that images are thought to be more like living beings than inanimate works of art. Rather than dismissing these responses as reflecting only naïve superstitions or primitive beliefs in magic, visual theorists attempt to more closely scrutinize intellectual traditions that do not presuppose that there exists a clear ontological distinction between representation and the realm of the real. In particular, Freedberg and Gell re-conceptualize what an image is by developing theories that explain how images are afforded the status of living entities and the function of social agents. Though neither of these scholars deals extensively with ancient images, their perspectives can potentially shed new light on certain aspects of ANE visual culture.

A compelling example of how contemporary theory and the study of ancient art might be integrated together is found in the work of ANE art historian Zainab Bahrani. Throughout much of her research, but especially in *The Graven Image*, Bahrani raises critical questions about the status of images and the implications of visual response in ancient Mesopotamia.[75] While Bahrani does not offer a sustained engagement of the work of Mitchell, Freedberg, or Gell, she does subject fundamental aspects of Mesopotamian visual culture to rigorous theoretical reflection. Her primary argument is that in the ancient Mesopotamian world, notions about the status and function of images "developed quite apart from post-Greek metaphysics and ideas of presentation as mimesis."[76] As a result, not unlike the theorists discussed above (§§5.2.1–2), Bahrani attempts to develop an approach to visual representation that adequately accounts for the power and agency of images.

While at certain points Bahrani does draw on the work of recent theorists, including Derrida, Lacan, Deleuze, and Baudrillard, her conclusions mostly emerge from an inductive analysis of primary materials from ancient Mesopotamia, including both images and texts. Thus, rather than merely applying contemporary theory to ancient artifacts, Bahrani's research seeks to uncover aspects of Mesopotamian visual culture that reso-

[75] See especially chapter 5 in Bahrani's *The Graven Image*: "*Ṣalmu:* Representation in the Real," 121–48.

[76] Ibid., 1.

nate with—and indeed, help refine and revise—perspectives on display in more recent work in visual theory. The intersection of contemporary visual theory and ancient art is especially evident in how Bahrani understands two particular issues: (1) ancient Mesopotamian perspectives on the nature of the *ṣalmu* (§5.3.1); and (2) the common practice in the ancient Mesopotamian warfare of stealing and/or defacing royal monuments and divine statuary (§5.3.2).

5.3.1. The *Ṣalmu* in Mesopotamian Visual Culture

The first example of how the above mentioned theories concerning the power and agency of art intersect with ancient Mesopotamian visual culture is to be found in Bahrani's reassessment of the nature and status of the *ṣalmu*. This Akkadian term can be variously translated as relief, statue, monument, or painting, though a more general term, such as image, is perhaps the best option since Mesopotamian scribes apply *ṣalmu* to a variety of different kinds of representation, typically of kings and deities.[77]

The *ṣalmu* has often been studied from the perspective of the Western aesthetic tradition's concern with different modes of signification—that is, the extent of mimetic correspondence between an image and its referent. For instance, Irene Winter has argued that the *ṣalmu* of the king is not to be taken as a portrait in the modern sense of the term. The king's image was not primarily designed to resemble the king in a strictly naturalistic or mimetic way. Rather, the king's *ṣalmu* constituted a culturally mediated sign that encoded social and political ideals about kingship in a specific representation of the royal body. That the image of the king reflects social and political ideals does not necessarily rule out there being some degree of resemblance between the appearance of the *ṣalmu* and the king's physical body. Indeed, at certain time periods and in different media, these representations did display varying levels of realism. Even still, it is perhaps best to think of the *ṣalmu* as a portrayal of kingship rather than as a portrait (at least in the modern sense of the term) of the king.[78]

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[77] For further discussion, see Irene Winter, "Art *in* Empire: The Royal Image and the Visual Dimensions of Assyrian Ideology," in *Assyria 1995: Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Helsinki, September 7–11, 1995* (ed. Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997), 364–65; and Bahrani, "Assault and Abduction: The Fate of the Royal Image in the Ancient Near East," *Art History* 18 (1995): 378–79 n. 46. See also my earlier discussion about the mode of signification (§4.3.3).

[78] For further discussion, see Winter, "Art *in* Empire;" and eadem, "Idols of the King: Royal Images as Recipients of Ritual Action in Ancient Mesopotamia," *JRitSt* 6 (1992): 13–42.

Bahrani presses the issue further by suggesting that the relationship between a *ṣalmu* and its referent "functioned according to a system unrelated to mimesis or perceptualism."[79] In making this claim, Bahrani intends to do more than just reiterate the now widely accepted notion that realism in art varies greatly from culture to culture.[80] Instead, Bahrani more provocatively suggests that how viewers negotiate the difference between reality and representation is itself culturally determined.[81]

Within the context of Mesopotamian visual culture, viewers did not maintain a rigid, ontological distinction between signifier and signified. In this tradition, the signifier itself (at least in some circumstances) was thought to have a nature and status that made it "an integral part of the real."[82] In Bahrani's view, the *ṣalmu* had "the potential of becoming an entity in its own right, a being rather than a copy of a being."[83] Rather than simply being a form of mediated representation, the *ṣalmu* functioned as a mode of embodiment such that the image itself "takes the place of the real or is conceived as a real essence."[84] Bahrani's perspective, which echoes many of the ideas expressed by Freedberg, radically challenges the notion in the Western aesthetic tradition that there exists a clearly defined dichotomy between reality and artifice, original and reproduction.

From the vantage point of Bahrani's research, none of Peirce's categories of visual representation—icon, symbol, and index—quite captures the nature of the *ṣalmu* within Assyro-Babylonian visual culture.[85] Instead, Bahrani contends that the *ṣalmu* is more akin to what is known as a simulacrum. In philosophical reflection on the visual arts, the term simulacrum is often used to refer to a kind of image without a model, a form of virtual

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[79] Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 122.

[80] The *locus classicus* on this issue is Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Bollingen Series 35; A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts 5; New York: Pantheon Books, 1960) which argues, among others things, that there is no normative sense of realism in art history and that variations in style are, at least in part, based on different modes of seeing the world.

[81] Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 88. A similar claim is made in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (trans. Brian Massumi; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

[82] Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 122.

[83] Ibid., 125.

[84] Ibid., 1.

[85] Ibid., 137. Bahrani does draw upon Peirce's language at one point when she suggests that ANE viewers saw the *ṣalmu* as a type of "indexically linked image" (ibid., 88). However, Bahrani neither elaborates on this point nor relies on this language throughout the rest of her study (though see p. 147). In fact, it seems that Bahrani understands the relationship between the signifier and its referent not only as one of contiguity (as is the case with Peirce's index) but also as one of essence.

reality or "hyperreality" that parades as an independent being.[86] Many art historians and philosophers throughout history have regarded simulacra as dangerous or deceptive entities since they subvert the stable dichotomy between representation and reality. Perhaps most famously, in Plato's *Sophists* the simulacrum is sharply contrasted with the icon (*eidos*), which represents the real in a mimetic fashion. According to Plato, the simulacrum is a phantasm that, in making a false claim to being, perverts the true (mimetic) purpose of the arts.[87]

Biblical scholarship also tends to cast simulacra in a negative light. Idolatry in the Hebrew Bible is often characterized in terms of a simulated reality—that is, idols deceive their viewers by masquerading as lifelike manifestations of the gods they represent. Not unlike Plato's *Sophists*, the idol parodies in Second Isaiah might be understood as emphasizing the fact that idols make false claims to being and are really nothing more than lifeless, senseless, thoughtless creations of ironsmiths and carpenters (see esp. Isa 44:9–20). When the author of Second Isaiah describes an idol as a "fraud" (שׁקר, Isa 44:20), he seems to anticipate the widely accepted philosophical notion that idols, like simulacra, are deceptive entities that make a false claim to being.

However, more recent philosophical discourse has challenged this negative characterization of the simulacrum. Among others, French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard argue that simulacra constitute neither failed imitations nor degraded copies.[88] Rather, as Deleuze puts it, the simulacrum "harbors a positive power which denies [the distinction between] the original and the copy, the model and the reproduction."[89] Likewise, Baudrillard contends that in the concept of the simulacrum one comes to terms not just with the power of images to manifest reality but, conversely, with the fact that the realm of the real is replete with representation. As Baudrillard puts it, "art is everywhere, since artifice is at the very heart of reality."[90] In fact, not only is it sometimes difficult to recognize that an image is a form of representation, but so too is it possible to define

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[86] Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 125. For a fuller discussion of concepts surrounding the simulacrum, see Michael Camille, "Simulacrum," in *Critical Terms for Art History* (ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff; 2d. ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003), 35–50.

[87] See especially Plato's *Sophists* §236 a–d.

[88] Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," in *Simulacra and Simulation* (trans. Sheila Faria Glaser; Body in Theory; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994 [1981]), 1–42; and Gilles Deleuze, "The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy," in *The Logic of Sense* (ed. by Constance V. Boundas; trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale; European Perspectives: A Series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism; New York: Columbia University Press, 1990 [1969]), 253–79.

[89] Deleuze, "The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy," 262.

[90] Baudrillard, *Simulations* (trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman; Semiotext[e] Foreign Agents Series; New York: Semiotext[e], 1983 [1981]), 131.

the real as "*that of which it is possible to give equivalent reproduction.*"[91] Thus, reality and representation are fully entangled in a web of ontological meaning.[92] Put simply, for Baudrillard images embody the presence of reality even as reality is densely embedded with representation.

Baudrillard's understanding of the simulacrum provides Bahrani with the vocabulary and conceptual framework for explaining how the *ṣalmu* was understood in ancient Assyro-Babylonian visual culture. Bahrani contends that in ancient Mesopotamian thought, representation and reality "could never be separated according to the ontological categories in which we believe."[93] Following Bahrani, I contend that the *ṣalmu*, not unlike the simulacrum, can be conceived of as a type of hypperreality in which the real presence of a thing or person could be embodied in and through representation. In the Assyro-Babylonian world, images could function as substitutes for, not just representations of, the things or people they signify.

This conclusion emerges not from a projection of contemporary theory onto ancient artifacts but rather a careful assessment of Mesopotamian perspectives on the nature and status of images. In particular, in the Assyro-Babylonian intellectual tradition it was believed that a person's presence could be experienced through his organic body as well as through a pluridimensional constellation of signifiers associated with that person—his name, offspring, hair, fingernails, garments, image, body double, and so forth.[94] Each of these objects was thought to manifest the presence or function of the person in question by means of an underlying connection between signifier and signified. In a sense, each of these signifiers repeats, rather than merely represents, its referent in ways that imply that represen-

[91] Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 146; emphasis his.

[92] It should be noted that notions surrounding the simulacrum are not only of interest to philosophers and visual theorists but are also prevalent in the world of science fiction literature. Perhaps most notable are Phillip K. Dick's many short stories that deal with simulacra, virtual reality, and the realm of the hyperreal. Particularly interesting is Dick's 1956 short story, "Pay for the Printer," in *The Father Thing* (vol. 3 of *The Complete Stories of Philip K. Dick*; London: Underwood-Miller, 1987), 239–52. In this story, Dick describes a post-nuclear holocaust world in which people have become completely dependent not on real things but on copies of real things that are made by a benign alien being named Biltong. This creature can make copies of every physical object (cars, toasters, clothes, etc.) that the people bring to it. Eventually, these copies of reality begin to fall apart and disintegrate on their own and Biltong is no longer able to produce further copies. In the end, the people are left having to relearn how to produce real objects, such as a simple cup. Dick's story becomes all the more chilling—and realistic—in light of the recent development of 3-D printers that literally can make copies of almost any conceivable object. In addition to science fiction, the simulacrum has figured in analyses of social politics and culture criticism, including issues related to the virtual reality staged by Disneyland and rhetorical strategies of presidential campaigns. For further discussion, see especially Baudrillard's *Simulations*.

[93] Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 12.

[94] Ibid., 132.

tation and reality are not (always, at least) rigidly distinguished. As such, when an image stands in as a substitute for the thing it represents, "a sublation of the signified into the signifier occurs, and the effacement of the distinction between them allows the representation to take on the full meanings of what it represents."[95]

Before proceeding to several examples of this phenomenon, a brief word of caution is in order. In my estimation, the idea of the *ṣalmu* as a type of hyperreality or simulacrum does not imply that there is *no difference* between signifier and signified. On this account, Bahrani may seem to overstate her case when she suggests, "In ancient Iraq such distinctions [between reality and representation] are not simply blurred but invalid."[96] Consider, for instance, a situation in which a Neo-Assyrian king was standing next to his own image, whether in the form of a statue or wall relief. An ancient viewer most certainly would have distinguished between the king and his *ṣalmu* and therefore would not have been confused about which was which. Thus, it would be taking Barhani's—or, for that matter, Freedberg's and Gell's—theory of representation too far to suggest that the distinction between signifier and signified was *always* and *completely* invalid in ANE (or any other) visual culture.

It would be better to say that there were certain circumstances and contexts that required this distinction to be invalidated in the eyes of the observer. In fact, Bahrani herself makes this very point. Instead of developing a general or universal rule about *all* forms of representation in the ANE world, Bahrani limits her comments to "instances and cultures where the image came to stand in as a valid substitute for the thing represented and where there is a need for the distinction between the two to be blurred or even effaced."[97] This did not always happen, and even when it did, some semblance of difference remained. As a result, Bahrani emphasizes that in ancient Mesopotamia and perhaps other cultures in the ANE world, the *ṣalmu* had the *potential* to take the place of, or substitute for, the thing it represented.

5.3.1.1. Repeating and Enabling Presence

The notion of the *ṣalmu* as a type of substitute for or repetition of the real presence of that which it signifies is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the previously discussed *mīs pî* ceremony (§5.2.1.2). Although it is clear that the *mīs pî* ceremony plays a critical role in transforming the status of the cult image, scholars disagree somewhat about how ancient viewers

[95] Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 183.
[96] Ibid., 183.
[97] Ibid., 183.

would have understood the resulting relationship between the image and the deity. For instance, Robert Carroll and Richard Elliott Friedman independently argue that ancient Near Eastern viewers never fully equated the image and the deity and instead saw the image primarily as a reminder of the deity's presence.[98] In contrast, Edward M. Curtis argues that the deity's presence is unequivocally embodied in the statue itself.[99] Still others, such as Michael B. Dick, take what might be considered a mediating position. Dick suggests that the cult image is best understood on analogy with the Roman Catholic sacramental theology of transubstantiation insofar as the statue becomes a conduit for divine self-disclosure—indeed, the real presence of the deity.[100]

Most likely, there was no single way of understanding this relationship in the ancient Near East, and perspectives probably varied across time and place. What is more, even though ancient viewers generally saw the *mīs pî* ceremony as conferring some degree of divine power, presence, or life on the image, they did not necessarily assume that there was a simple, one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified. In fact, the "real presence" conferred on the image was not permanent. The deity could abandon the image if it was neglected by its worshipers or put in danger by enemy forces.[101] Likewise, the presence and power of the deity was not confined to a single representation but was simultaneously accessible through multiple objects, including other cult statues and various attributes and symbols associated with the deity. Thorkild Jacobsen captures the interplay between identity and difference in the relationship between the cult image and deity in the following manner:

> The god—or rather the specific form of him that was represented in this particular image—was born in heaven, not on earth. In the birth the craftsmen-gods that form the embryo in the womb gave it form. When born in heaven it consented to descend and to "participate" . . . in the image, thus transubstantiating it. The image as such remains a promise, a potential, and an incentive to theophany, to a divine presence, no more.[102]

In light of these ambiguities, it is best to conclude that an image that went through the *mīs pî* ceremony was capable of making the deity's power and

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[98] See, for instance, Robert Carroll, "The Aniconic God and the Cult of Images," *Studia Theologica* 31 (1977): 53; and Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1987), 35.

[99] Edward M. Curtis, "Images in Mesopotamia and the Bible: A Comparative Study," in *The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature* (ed. William W. Hallo, Bruce W. Jones, Gerald L. Mattingly; vol. 3 of *Scripture in Context;* ANETS 3; Lewiston: Mellen, 1990), 42.

[100] Dick, "The Mesopotamian Cult Statue," 43.

[101] Ibid., 57.

[102] Jacobsen, "The Graven Image," 29.

efficacy available to the viewer even as it never became fully coterminous with the deity in any simplistic or permanent fashion.

While the *mīs pî* ceremony nicely illustrates Bahrani's perspective, the sublation of signified and signifier is not constrained to divine images. For example, when an inauspicious omen was given for a king, officials would prepare a substitute king (*šar pūḫi*) as a type of body double to take his place. In Mesopotamian texts, the substitute is initially referred to as a *ṣalmu*, but after an elaborate ceremony in which the body double is, among other things, named as king and made to wear the king's garments, he simply becomes the king—not another king, but a repetition of the real king.[103] As in Gell's theory, there is no "as if" with regard to how the substitute king functions as a social (or better yet, political) agent. The logic of this practice of substitution is predicated on the belief that, as a signifier for the king, the body double repeats and/or enables the presence of its referent, and as such, obtains the ontological status and social agency of the king himself. In fact, there is at least one example from the nineteenth century B.C.E. in which a substitute king, named Enlil-bani, retains the throne after the original king, Erra-imitti, died, even though he had been a mere gardener prior to the ceremony.[104]

However, in most cases the original (or real) king does not entirely lose claim to his royal status when the body-double is in place. During the period of substitution, which could last as long as a hundred days, the real king took on the guise of a farmer in the palace gardens. At the end of this period, the substitute king was put to death and given a royal funeral. Only at that point could the original king be restored, often through the repetition of enthronement rites.[105] Thus, while the royal status of the original king seems to "go underground" during the reign of the substitute, it can be reactivated. That is, the "king potential" is never fully lost, though it seems that it can only be fully manifested in one individual at a time.

Another example involves ritual battle enactments. In anticipation of a military operation, officials would use tallow figurines in what amounted to a type of role-playing game of war.[106] At the broadest level, the ritual enactment itself can be understood as a simulacrum since the officials believed that what they did with the figurines would determine the real events

[103] Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 130. This substitution does not seem to require physical resemblance, though it does seem to require a correspondence of social rank. Bahrani notes that in some cases, an individual was "fictitiously promoted to the rank of royal official solely for the purpose of being a possible candidate as substitute king" (ibid., 130).

[104] Ibid., 130.

[105] For further discussion of the "substitute king ritual" in Assyria, see Simo Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1983; repr., Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997), xxii–xxxii.

[106] For a brief discussion, see Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 130–31.

on the battlefield. As a result, it was not enough simply to replace the king with his *ṣalmu* (the tallow figurine) since damage done to the one was thought to directly affect the other. Instead, through a secondary act of representational displacement, the tallow figurine of one of the king's officers was used as a type of miniature body double of the king's *ṣalmu*. This practice assured that the organic body of the king was twice removed from any potential harm.

As in the previous example, Bahrani (following Deleuze) contends that the *ṣalmu* repeats the presence or essence of the king not unlike a fractal, and in so doing, creates, at least to a certain degree, "an indiscernibility of the original real and the unreal reproduction."[107] This notion suggests that reality itself is "made up of endless signs," each of which is part of a semantic constellation through one's identity (in this case, the king's) is expressed.[108] Thus, the web of interchangeability between representation and reality extends not only between a person and his *ṣalmu* but also between a multitude of signifiers, including an individual's garment, fingernails, seed, shadow, and so forth. This is why the king's presence can be encountered in the realm of the real through various signifiers, whether in the form of an organic body double or a tallow figurine.

If ancient viewers understood the *ṣalmu* as "enabl[ing] presence through reproduction," then it becomes necessary to reconsider the function of certain types of images in Mesopotamian visual culture.[109] Scholars have long recognized that some ANE images were believed to have an apotropaic power that extended beyond their iconographic content or propagandistic message. For instance, protective clay figurines, known as *laḫmu* and *apkallu*, were often buried under palace floors and courtyards. Similarly, colossal winged bulls and lions called *lamassu* often flanked the entrance of a city or palace gate in order to guard them from attack.[110] Bahrani describes these and other types of apotropaic objects as examples of "performative imagery" in that they do not as much present a mimetic copy of a preexisting reality as they create reality itself through an act of representation.[111] As Bahrani puts it, "representation was thought to make things happen, not simply to depict."[112]

Thus, rather than explain the apotropaic function of certain images in terms of a primitive belief in animism, Bahrani conceptualizes this phenomenon in terms of a complex metaphysical linkage between representa-

[107] Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 132.

[108] Ibid., 132–33.

[109] Eadem, *Rituals of War*, 52.

[110] The *lamassu* often bear inscriptions that speak of them as animate objects that were capable of walking away (ibid., 52).

[111] Ibid., 53.

[112] Ibid., 53.

tion and reality.[113] This linkage, however, moves in both directions. Just as the creation of a performative image can bring about an intended effect on reality, so too can the destruction of the same image defuse its power and agency (see §5.3.2). In either case, Bahrani's point is that images can have a performative function to the extent that they participate in and are affected by events in reality as a type of animate object.

5.3.1.2. Evaluation

How does Bahrani's understanding of the *ṣalmu* in the context of Mesopotamian visual culture correspond with Freedberg's and Gell's theories about the power and agency of art? At the broadest level, I understand Bahrani's research as a way of historicizing contemporary theories about the animation of art for the specific context of Mesopotamian visual culture.[114] Specifically, the idea of the simulacrum is a philosophical concept that enables Bahrani to talk about the ways in which the *ṣalmu* transcends the divide between representation and reality in a manner that closely adheres to the perspectives on display in these contemporary theorists.

In addition, Bahrani, like Freedberg, argues that the *ṣalmu* is an ontological category rather than an aesthetic one.[115] As a mode of presencing the real, images in the ancient Mesopotamian world had the power to participate in, or even create, the very reality they sought to represent. As was the case with many of the examples Freedberg provides, Mesopotamian viewers responded to images in much the same way as they would to a living being. Thus, the *ṣalmu* is a concrete, contextually situated example of what Freedberg contends is a widely attested phenomenon in the history of visual response.

However, in my view, the linkage between Bahrani's research and Gell's theory is less clear. Bahrani's approach is not necessarily anthropological. Neither does she explicitly discuss the *ṣalmu* in terms of its influence on social networks. Even when Bahrani refers to the *ṣalmu* as an "indexically linked image," she does not exactly have in mind Gell's notion of art as an index of social agency.[116] Nevertheless, at several points Bahrani does acknowledge that a *ṣalmu* can function as a substitute for the person it

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[113] Bahrani, *Rituals of War*., 59–60.

[114] Eadem, *The Graven Image*, 10. Thus, as was the case in the previous discussion about the nature of visual representation (§4.2.4), Bahrani shows in practice what other contemporary scholars suggest in theory.

[115] Ibid., 133.

[116] For Gell, index is a technical term that attempts to account for the way in which art signals social agency. In this sense, art is an index of a network of social interactions more than it is an index of its referent's essence or presence. That is to say, Gell's interest is anthropological in nature, not ontological (so Bahrani) nor even semiotic (so Peirce).

represents, and therefore one can infer that Assryo-Babylonian images were in fact treated as a type of social agent that could structure and motivate networks of relationships in a variety of different circumstances. That the *ṣalmu* can occupy a position within a social system typically reserved for human beings will become especially evident in the next section (§5.3.2), which addresses the way in which ANE images were treated as enemy combatants in the context of war.

While Bahrani's research demonstrates how recent theories about the power and agency of art can helpfully frame the study of ancient Mesopotamian visual culture, it is also the case that the study of Mesopotamian visual culture can help further refine contemporary visual theory.[117] In this sense, Bahrani can be seen not only as historicizing the work of Freedberg and Gell but also as expanding and revising their interpretive framework in light of contextual observations about ancient visual responses.

For example, while both Freedberg and Bahrani affirm that a semantic overlap, or interchangeability, exists between reality and representation, Freedberg is primarily concerned with how a signifier "retained something of the original within it and could even take the place of the represented."[118] By drawing a parallel between the *ṣalmu* and the philosophical idea of the simulacrum, Bahrani also attempts to shed light on the other side of this linkage—that is, how reality itself is replete with, or even replaced by, representation. Indeed, in Baudrillard's view, reality is "no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum: not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference."[119]

Bahrani's conclusions about the Mesopotamian view of reality may not be as provocative or extreme as Baudrillard's description of the simulacrum. Nevertheless, Bahrani does underscore the fact that ancient viewers were "acutely aware of the play of signs within the real" not just the embodiment of the real within visual signs.[120] As was previously discussed (§4.2.4), Bahrani contends that in ancient Mesopotamian thought, the cosmos itself was considered to be a dense sign system in which everyday phenomena, from weather events to dreams to body parts, had the potential to be read as coded messages from the gods if subjected to certain analytical procedures. In my view, it is far clearer in Bahrani's work than in Freedberg's that the relationship between reality and representation is dialectical in nature. Thus, Bahrani's research on ancient Mesopotamian visual culture should remind contemporary visual theorists to attend not only to the ways in which representation embodies the real but also how reality itself is replete with repre-

[117] Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 10.
[118] Ibid., 183.
[119] Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," 6.
[120] Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 146.

sentation. Perhaps Freedberg would not disagree with this conclusion. But in any event, Bahrani draws more attention to the dialectical interdependence of reality and representation than is evident in Freedberg's *The Power of Images*. And in doing so, Bahrani's work has the potential to prompt contemporary visual theorists to attend more closely to how ancient art objects demonstrate and occasionally nuance their theories.

Similarly, Bahrani's research also surfaces a potential limitation regarding Gell's concept of agency. From an anthropological perspective, to say that art has agency is to acknowledge the ways in which a given image can substitute for a human being within a network of social relationships. For Gell, this substitution is one of function. Art acquires agency by functioning like, or playing the role of, a human actor in a given social system. A similar idea is evident in Ernst Gombrich's famous essay, "Meditations on a Hobby Horse, or the Roots of Artistic Form."[121] In this essay, Gombrich essentially argues that a hobby horse becomes a substitute for a real horse (at least in a child's imagination) through an analogy of function—both types of horses share the quality of ridability. In the case of the *šar pūḫi*, a similar substitution seems to take place: a commoner becomes a substitute for the real king through an analogy of function.

However, Bahrani argues that the *šar pūḫi* does more than just play the role of king.[122] Bahrani contends that "unlike Gombrich's hobby horse, it is not through function that the representation [i.e., the *ṣalmu*] can become a substitute."[123] Rather, in ancient Mesopotamia, the *ṣalmu* works "on the basis of the belief in the possibility of appearance or presence through the semantic constellation that makes up an identity." In other words, the substitution implies the repetition of presence not just a similarity of function.

I find Bahrani's understanding persuasive on this point, but I wonder if such a sharp distinction needs to be made between function and presence. One might say that the substitution of presence itself enables the *šar pūḫi* to function analogously with the actual king. Presencing, in this view, is a function. Or conversely, one might say that a similarity of function makes it easier for the viewer to come to terms with the idea of the *šar pūḫi* as a repetition of the king's presence. In either case, it seems that the *šar pūḫi* functions like the king even as he is also part of a semantic constellation that signifies the king's presence. Thus, in my reading, it seems best to understand the nature and status of the *ṣalmu* in terms that include Gell's theory of social agency as well as Bahrani's notions about the repetition of presence in and through representation (i.e., the simulacrum).

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[121] Gombrich's essay first appeared in 1951 as part of a symposium entitled "Aspects of Form: A Symposium on Form in Nature and Art." He later published it as part of a larger collection of essays in the volume *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art* (London: Phaidon, 1963), 1–11.

[122] Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 132.

[123] Ibid.,133.

5.3.2. The Theft and Destruction of Images

A second example of how theories about the power and agency of art can shed light on ancient visual culture has to do with certain responses to images in the context of war. Namely, through the history of the ANE world, monumental art and statues, especially those bearing the image of the king or the deity, were frequently defaced or stolen by soldiers of invading armies.

Such practices are attested in Middle and Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions and are evident from the archaeological record. For example, when a combined force of Medes and Babylonians overthrew the Neo-Assyrian capital in 612 B.C.E., they defaced certain wall reliefs and other visual artifacts in the royal palaces at Nineveh. The famous Lachish reliefs, which are located in Sennacherib's Southwest Palace, show signs of deliberate damage. In a panel depicting an enthroned Sennacherib receiving tribute after having laid siege to the city (ca. 701 B.C.E.), attackers appear to have used a sharp tool to gouge out the king's face (**fig. 5.1**).

Also in the Southwest Palace, the same forces targeted a series of reliefs that depict Ashurbanipal's defeat of the Elamites at the battle of Til-Tuba in 653 B.C.E. After the Elamite king Teumman had been executed, the Assyrians appointed a puppet ruler in his place. In a scene that depicts an Assyrian presenting this new king, the head of the ruler is almost completely scratched out.[124] Likewise, in the North Palace, a wall relief portrays Ashurbanipal and his queen Ashur-Sharrat feasting in a garden where Teumman's severed head hangs from a nearby tree. Here again, the faces of both royal figures, and perhaps also the king's hand, appear to have been gouged out (**fig. 5.2**).

Other images of the king at Nineveh, including the bronze head of an Akkadian ruler, perhaps Sargon (fig. 5.3), have also been found in damaged condition.125 In these instances, while the image of the king is partly destroyed, most other visual elements in the scenes are left unharmed. The specificity of the damage done to these images strongly suggests not only that these acts were not random, but that the soldiers who carried out the attack either possessed some degree of visual literacy or were accompanied by scribes/artists who were familiar with iconographic conventions.

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[124] Another scene depicts the beheading of the Elamite king Teumman. In this case, the face of the Assyrian solider who carries out the execution is marred.

[125] In the case of "Sargon's" head (fig. 5.3), it might be argued that the damage done was simply a result of soldiers trying to extract precious stones that were inset in the eye sockets. However, Carl Nylander has shown that this object was intentionally mutilated in three other places as well: 1) the end of the nose was flattened by a blunt tool such as a hammer; 2) both ears were cut off; and 3) the tips of the king's forked beard were broken off. For further discussion, see Carl Nylander, "Earless in Nineveh," *AJA* 48 (1980): 329–30.

Figure 5.1. Close up of Sennacherib from the Lachish relief, Southwest Palace at Nineveh, early 7th c. B.C.E. Image available through the Creative Commons Attribution Share Alike 4.0 license. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sanherib-Lachisch.png; cf. Baharni, *The Graven Image*, 153 fig. 11.

In addition to these examples of violence against images, there is also ample evidence that certain royal monuments and divine statuary were stolen during the course of military operations. This practice is often cited in Middle- and Neo-Assyrian literature, especially in letters about military campaigns. These reports use a variety of terms to describe the theft of these images, including "to count as spoil" (*ana šallati/šallatiš manū*), "to carry off" (*našū*), "to bring out" (*šūṣū*), "to deport" (*nasāḫu*), "to lead away" (*abāku*), "to rob" (*ḫabātu*), "to take away by force" (*ekēmu*), and "to lead to Assryia" (*ana māt Aššur warū*).[126]

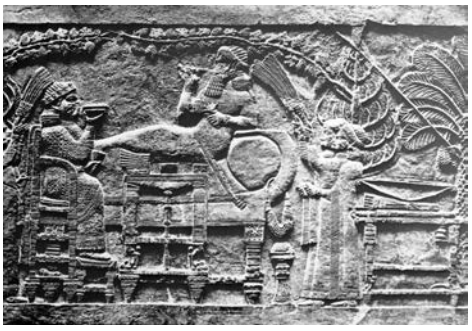
Further still, a letter describing Sargon's eighth campaign describes how his soldiers deported the cult statues of Urartu's chief deities, *Ḫaldia* and *Bagbartu*, from the Muṣaṣir temple to Assyria.[127] Likewise, reports of Sennacherib's attack on Babylon refer to the deportation of numerous objects, including the statue of Marduk as well as his throne and ritual bed.[128] Starting from the time of Tiglath-Pileser III, wall reliefs actually depict Assyrian soldiers carrying off cult statues from conquered towns.

Similarly, in the aftermath of his successful campaign against Babylon in 1158 B.C.E., the Elamite King Shutruk-Nahunte uprooted several prominent royal monuments and transported these massive objects some 250

[126] Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 23.

[127] TCL 3, 368, and 423.

[128] Daniel David Luckenbill, *The Annals of Sennacherib* (OIP 2; Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago Press, 1924), 83.43–54.




Figures 5.2–3. Left: Close up of Ashurbanipal's banquet scene, Southwest Palace at Nineveh, mid-7th c.B.C.E. Image available in the public domain: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:S03_06_01_017_image_2342.jpg; cf. Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 155 fig. 13. Right: Bronze head of an Akkadian ruler (Sargon?), Nineveh, 23rd c. B.C.E. Image available in the public domain: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sargon_of_Akkad.jpg; cf. Bahrani, *The Graven Image* 161 fig. 19.

miles back to the ancient city of Susa. The most well known of these stolen artifacts is the Law Code of Hammurabi. This seven-foot tall diorite stele, which had stood in public display in the marketplace of Sippar since the eighteenth century B.C.E., includes an image of King Hammurabi before Šamaš (**fig. 5.4**).[129] Also among the booty at Susa are: the famous victory stele of Naram-Sîn, which portrays the king (who wears the horned crown of the gods) triumphing over the Lullubi people (**fig. 5.5**) and a bust of a Babylonian king, perhaps Hammurabi. As with the artifacts found at Nineveh, invading forces seem to have deliberately damaged or altered some of these objects.[130] In many cases, the original inscriptions were erased and then replaced with new inscriptions that boast of Shutruk-Nahunte's victory and successful removal of the images from their native context.[131]

It is not entirely clear why some deported images were damaged and others were not, though perhaps different policies were used depending on

[129] The bulk of past scholarship on the Hammurabi Code has directed attention, perhaps rightly so, to the meaning and significance of the textual data. Nevertheless, the image itself would have been the most prominent visual elements for observers, even if they possessed the ability to read the written materials.

[130] One should especially note the freestanding statue of Darius the Great that was found in a severely damaged state at Susa. While most scholars agree that it was originally located in Heliopolis, Egypt, it most likely was transported to Susa at some later time, perhaps even during the reign of Darius. For further discussion of this artifact, including the motivations behind its damage, see Shahrokh Razmjou, "Assessing the Damage: Notes on the Life and Demise of the Statue of Darius from Susa," *Ars Orientalis* 32 (2002): 81–104.

[131] Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 162.

the importance of the persons or deities represented.[132] On the whole there is little evidence to suggest exactly how these statues were treated once they were brought into enemy territory. During the Neo-Assyrian period, captured statues were sometimes dedicated to the Assyrian gods, but in most cases it seems that the statues were simply kept in storage, far removed from public view.[133] After a period of time, most stolen images were returned to their original shrines, but often only after the defeated ruler made a plea for their return and pledged his loyalty. In other cases, the captors returned the image as a way of garnering support from the conquered people and/or their gods.

Much more might be said about the destruction and theft of images in Mesopotamian warfare. But for the purposes of this discussion, I am most interested in how scholars have attempted to characterize the motivations that lie behind this type of visual response. The literature available on this topic tends to describe acts of violence against images in terms of either vandalism or politically motivated iconoclasm.[134] For instance, in his

[132] In general, it seems that divine images from small shrines were destroyed in the course of military operations while cult statues from major temples were deported. However, a rigid distinction was not maintained.

[133] For further discussion, see Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 24–30.

[134] In *The Graven Image* (162), Bahrani suggests that the scholarship on this issue is limited to three brief articles: Carl Nylander, "Earless in Nineveh;" Thomas Beran, "Leben und Tod der Bilder," in *Ad bene et fideliter seminandum: Festgabe für Karlheinz Deller zum 21. Februar 1987* (ed. Gerlinde Mauer, Ursula Magen, and Karlheinz Deller; AOAT 220; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1988), 55–60; and Prudence Oliver Harper, Joan Aruz, and Françoise Tallon, eds., *The Royal City of Susa: Treasures from the Louvre Museum* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992). However, several other articles should be noted, most of which appeared after Bahrani's *The Graven Image*: Natalie Naomi May, "Decapitation of Statues and Mutilation of the Image's Facial Features," in *A Woman of Valor: Jerusalem Studies in the Ancient Near East in Honor of Joan Goodnick Westenholz* (ed. Wayne Horowitz, Uri Gabbay, and Filip Vukosavović; Biblioteca del Proximó Oriente Antiguo 8; Madrid: Consejo Superor de Investigaciones Científicas, 2010), 105–18; Nylander, "Breaking the Cup of Kingship: An Elamite Coup in Nineveh?" *Iranica Antiqua* 34 (1999): 71–83; Barbara N. Porter, "Noseless in Nimrud: More Figurative Responses to Assyrian Domination," in *Of God(s), Trees, Kings, and Scholars: Neo-Assyrian and Related Studies in Honour of Simo Parpola* (ed. Mikko Luuko, Saana Svärd, and Raija Mattila; Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 2009), 201–20; Marc A. Brandes, "Destruction et mutilation de statues en Mesopotamie," *Akkadica* 16 (1980): 28–41; and the previously mentioned article by Razmjou, "Assessing the Damage." Most significantly, a 2008 seminar at the Oriental Institute in Chicago focused on specific examples of and reasons behind text and image destruction in the ancient Near East. The papers presented at this seminar were recently published in a volume edited by Eleanor Guralnick and Natalie Naomi May, *Iconoclasm and Text Destruction in the Ancient Near East and Beyond* (OIS 8; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). In addition, one should also note David Frankfurter, "The Vitality of Egyptian Images in Late Antiquity: Christian Memory and Response," in *The*


Figures 5.4–5. Left: The Law Code of Hammurabi, Susa, 18th c. B.C.E. Image available in the public domain: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Milkau_Oberer_Teil_der_Stele_mit_dem_Text_von_Hammurapis_Gesetzescode_369-jpg). Right: The Victory Stele of Naram-Sîn, Susa, 23rd c. B.C.E. Image available in the public domain: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stele_Naram_Sim_Louvre_Sb4.jpg.

analysis of the colossal statue of Darius the Great at Susa, Achaemenid historian Shahrokh Razmjou contends that at least some of the damage done can be attributed to Macedonian soldiers who used the statue for target practice.[135] Razmjou characterizes these acts as "episodes of wanton casual violence" that reflect little more than "public irreverence."[136]

Though Razmjou does admit that a portion of the damage was intentionally inflicted in order to "erase the statue's meaning and identity," he attributes this motivation only to the destruction done to the hieroglyphic inscriptions on the statue (i.e., the royal name and title of Darius).[137] However, in light of the pictorial nature of Egyptian hieroglyphs, it might well be argued that defacing the inscription is itself a form of violence against images. But curiously, when Razmjou discusses the deliberate hack marks to the image itself (behind the left arm and to the right wrist), he reverts to the language of "symbolic acts of vandalism" and does not explicitly connect this damage to an assault on the statue's identity or meaning.[138]

Likewise, in his consideration of the mutilated head of "Sargon" (**fig. 5.3**), Carl Nylander argues that the damage done to the left eye, both ears,

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Sculptural Environment of the Roman Near East: Reflections on Culture, Ideology, and Power (ed. by Yaron Z. Eliav, Elise A. Friedland, and Sharon Herbert; Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Culture and Religion 9; Dudley, Mass.: Peeters, 2008), 659–78.

[135] Razmjou, "Assessing the Damage," 94.

[136] Ibid., 94, 97.

[137] Ibid., 94.

[138] Ibid., 92. However, in light of Bahrani's conceptualization of the *ṣalmu*, it would seem that an attack on the body of the image would constitute no less an attack on the identity and meaning of the statue (or indeed, Darius himself) than the royal name inscriptions.

nose, and beard are intended as a form of political iconoclasm. In other words, the selective defacement of images was designed to send a propagandistic message that all could see: the political power of the enemy, as symbolized in the image of the king, had been defeated and humiliated.

Importantly, Nylander contends that the effectiveness of this spectacle depends on a linkage between representation and reality: "The closer the correspondence between the practices of real life and the treatment of the image the more effective the message of overthrow and humiliation."[139] In particular, Nylander notes that sanction systems in the ancient Near East often prescribed corporeal punishments and that "such mutilations could easily be extended symbolically to inanimate objects."[140]

It is not difficult to imagine that various art objects were the target of vandalism, looting, theft, or politically motivated iconoclasm in the context of ANE warfare. While such motivations were surely present, they do not seem to tell the whole story. It is also possible to understand these instances of visual response in light of the above mentioned theories about the power and agency of art, and in particular, the *ṣalmu*. In this sense, it seems unnecessary to follow Nylander in concluding that the mutilation (and theft) of images was only "symbolic" or that the effectiveness of such damage was predicated on a mere analogy with sanctions involving corporeal punishment. Indeed, if certain images were thought to repeat, enable, and/or substitute for the presence of that which they represented, then it might well be concluded that the mutilation of enemy combatants and their images *both* constituted deliberate acts of corporeal punishment.

5.3.2.1. Assault and Abduction

Building upon her theory that the *ṣalmu* functions as a repetition of the real presence of the thing or person depicted, Bahrani contends that violence against images was more than just a symbolic or propagandistic act in the context of war. Rather, defacing and stealing images were "distinctive military strategies" akin to assaulting and abducting enemy combatants.[141] Bahrani concludes as follows:

> Thus, royal images were not stolen and mutilated in a moment of barbaric looting. They were taken into captivity and punished as if live beings because of a complex religious and philosophical worldview in which representation by im-

[139] Nylander, "Earless in Nineveh," 331.
[140] Ibid., 331.
[141] Bahrani, *Rituals of War*, 163.

> age was a real, not a symbolic, substitution, and having control of a person's image was one more way of having control of that person.[142]

Closer scrutiny of the damaged artifacts themselves corroborates the notion that ANE viewers understood there to be a certain type of ontological overlap, or interchangeability, between the *ṣalmu* and the person it signified.

First, it is evident that the damage done to the king's image tended to specifically target certain body parts, such as the eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. It is possible that this was done in order to render the king symbolically blind, deaf, dumb, etc. However, from the perspective of Gell's "internalist" strategy of imparting agency, I think that the targeting of facial features is potentially more significant. For Gell, the presence of external features such as the eyes implies that an image has a certain type of "interiority" by analogy with the array of intra-subjective relationships assumed for human beings (i.e., exterior body → internal mind/self).

I suspect that a similar notion might underlie the pattern of destruction that is found on certain ANE artifacts. Specifically, ANE soldiers might have targeted the eyes and other facial features precisely because they, more than any other parts of the body, signaled the existence of a type of internal social agency. In this way, scratching out the eyes and mouth of an image might have been the logical converse of the consecration ceremonies in which an image obtains its life and agency through the ritual washing or opening of these same bodily features. If this is the case, invading soldiers might be understood as attempting to reverse the mechanism by which the image became animated in the first place. Thus, rather than only being an expression of political vandalism, the destruction of images was a deliberate attempt to extract from an image its internal agency and lifelike status.

Second and closely related, epigraphic evidence from some monumental reliefs suggests that ancient viewers perceived acts of violence against the king's image as a type of assault on the real body of the king himself. For instance, Ashurbanipal adds the following inscription to a mutilated statue of the Elamite king Hallusu, which had been stolen from Susa:

> The statue of Hallusu, King of Elam, the one who plotted evil against Assyria and engaged in hostilities against Sennacherib, King of Assyria, my grandfather, his tongue, which had been slandering, I cut off, his lips, which had spoken insolence, I pierced, his hands, which had grasped the bow against Assyria, I chopped off.[143]

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[142] Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 182.

[143] Translation by Rykle Borger, *Beiträge zum Inschriftenwerk Assurbanipals* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996), 54. As cited in Bahrani, *Rituals of War*, 164.

In this inscription, it is somewhat unclear—and perhaps intentionally so—if the third person masculine pronouns used throughout refer to the king or the king's image. The effacement of this distinction encourages the reader to understand this ekphrastic account of image violence as referring to a type of corporeal punishment exacted on the king himself. The fate of the king is tied to the fate of his *ṣalmu*.[144]

A similar logic is implied by the curses that are often inscribed on royal images. These inscriptions, which appear since at least the middle of the third millennium, describe the severe consequences that would befall anyone who dared to attack the image of the king:

> Whosoever should deface my statue
> And put his name on it and say
> "It is my statue" let Enlil, the lord of this statue,
> and Šamaš tear out his genitals and drain out
> his semen. Let them not give him any heir.[145]

In curses like this one, it is clear that the damage done to the image was perceived as constituting something more than just a political act that brought symbolic disgrace to the ruler. In light of the particular punishment mentioned here—the ending of the attacker's progeny—it seems that the act of defacing the image is thought to be much closer to murder or physical assault than it was to vandalism. In fact, the nature of the punishment described here seems to adhere to the eye-for-an-eye paradigm in the ANE legal tradition. In this case, sterilization was considered to be an appropriate punishment for destroying the king's image precisely because it was believed that erecting an image constituted one of the ways in which a king could secure his posterity.[146] The punishment, in other words, fits the crime.

These observations resonate with the conclusions Freedberg draws about the implications of acts of violence against images more broadly. What sets Freedberg's work apart from other studies of extreme forms of iconoclasm is the way in which he attempts to link the psychological, cog-

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[144] Various omens suggest that damage done to the king's image is thought to do physical harm to the king: "If the image of the king of the country in question, or the image of his father, or the image of his grandfather falls over and breaks, or if its shape warps, (this means that) the days of the king of that country will be few in number" (James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* [3d ed. with suppl.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969], 340). As cited by Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 182.

[145] Translation by Giorgio Buccellati, "Through a Tablet Darkly," in *The Tablet and the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W. Hallo* (ed. Mark E. Cohen, Daniel C. Snell, and David B. Weisberg; Bethesda, Md.: CDL, 1993), 70. As cited by Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 169.

[146] The other ways of securing posterity included having children and recording great deeds.

nitive, political, and even theological underpinnings of this form of visual response to critical reflection about the ontology of images. He contends that the impulse to destroy works of art is:

> predicated in one way or another on the attribution of life to the figure represented, or on the related assumption that the sign is in fact the signified, that image is prototype, that the dishonor paid to the image—to invert Saint Basil's famous dictum—does not simply pass to its prototype, but actually damages the prototype. The evident corollary is that we respond to the image as if it were alive, real.[147]

Thus the iconoclast, no less than the iconodule, is motivated by an underlying belief that certain images are more than just works of art. Rather than being just a symbolic or political act, violence against images operates at the level of the real insofar as its effects are often thought to carry over to the thing or person signified.[148] In this regard, Freedberg's theoretical perspective anticipates the more practical conclusions Bahrani offers concerning the destruction of images in the context of ancient Mesopotamian war.

There is also evidence to affirm that in ancient Assyro-Babylonian warfare, viewers understood stolen images more as human captives than as pillaged goods. To begin with, economic motives alone cannot fully account for why invading armies would have gone to such pains (and, no doubt, expense) to transport partly mutilated visual artifacts hundreds of miles back to their homeland.[149] Neither should it be concluded that image theft was merely a by-product of the frenzy of war, on par with the unconscionable looting of the National Museum of Iraq during the spring of 2003.[150] Instead, Bahrani contends that stealing images should be understood as a "productive operation of war."[151] As a strategy of dislocation, the abduction of images is analogous to the capture and deportation of human populations, a practice especially well known in Neo-Assyrian imperial policy in the early-first millennium. For instance, from the inscriptions found on victory stelae, we know that kings often would boast of having abducted the images of a foreign ruler. In fact, these images were occasionally put on public display at the city gates, much like the mutilated bodies of defeated royal enemies.[152]

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[147] Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 415.

[148] Ibid., 392.

[149] Bahrani, *Rituals of War*, 162.

[150] During the course of several days in the spring of 2003, thousands of excavation site pieces and many other valuable artifacts were stolen (including the Uruk Vase) from exhibition halls. Fortunately, some—but certainly not all—of these artifacts have since been recovered.

[151] Ibid., 163.

[152] Ibid., 174.

Similar arguments can be made with respect to the abduction of cult images. As already argued above (§5.3.1), in ancient Mesopotamia the cult image was thought to be "the manifestation of the god in the realm of human beings."[153] Although not employed in every case, the removal of the cult statuary of a conquered enemy became a common strategy of war by the early second millennium. This practice is evident in the wall reliefs from Sennacherib's Southwest Palace at Nineveh and Tiglath-Pileser III's Palace at Nimrud (**figs. 5.6–7**). In these cases, statues and other art objects are shown along with human captives being brought before the enthroned king. In light of Bahrani's understanding of the *ṣalmu*, I believe it is better to understand the cult statues in this relief as prisoners of war, not just stolen goods.

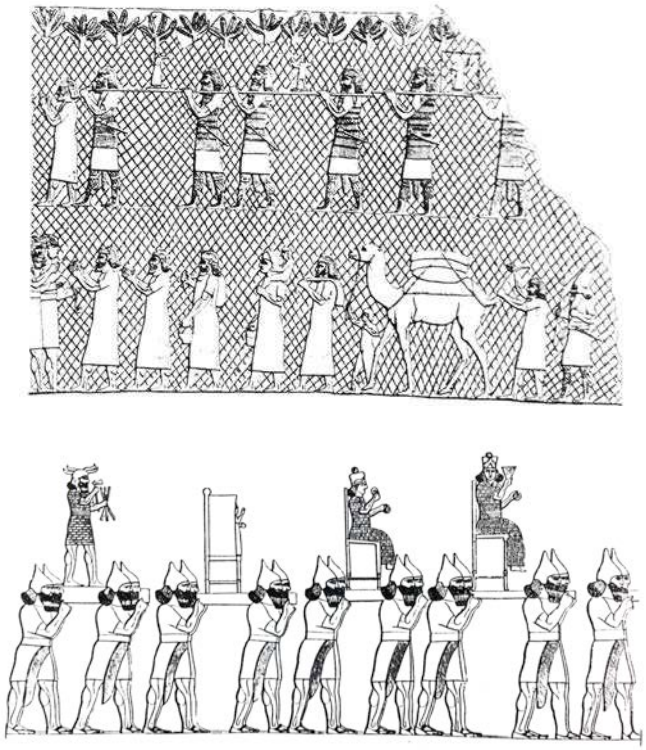
Likewise, the cult statue of Marduk was often a target of deportation. On several occasions, foreign armies abducted Marduk's cult image from Esagila, his temple in Babylon. As Bahrani argues, the cult statue was believed to be part of a constellation of signifiers that could manifest the real presence of the deity, and therefore taking it captive as a type of prisoner attempted to weaken the enemy by removing from its land the protective presence of the deity.[154] In many cases, the cult statue would be held hostage until oaths of loyalty and submission could be extracted from the rulers of the defeated land. Thus, in the mind's eye of ancient viewers, loss of the cult statue was tantamount to the deity being imprisoned or exiled.

As such, it is hardly surprising to find out that great effort was made to return the image to its rightful place. Bahrani points out that in certain instances, "wars were fought specifically for images, to acquire royal monument and the cult statue of a god, or to recover a divine statue that had been carried off by an enemy in an earlier battle."[155] Today, we might refer to such military operations as "extractions" or "exfiltrations" since their primary objective was to ensure the safe return of the captured deity. In other cases, Assyrian rulers returned the statue on their own accord. But even in these instances, it was assumed that what was being returned was

[153] Bahrani, *Rituals of War*, 163.

[154] However, there was not a one-to-one relationship between the deity and its image. As discussed earlier, the presence or essence of a deity (or person) could be expressed through a pluridimensional network of signifiers. Thus, while a cult statue manifested the real presence of the deity, the deity was not inextricably bound to that object and neither did the destruction or deportation of that object completely vanquish the deity's presence. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that after a divine image was stolen from a temple, new statues were fashioned to take their place, which allowed the cult to resume.

[155] Ibid., 160. For instance, Neo-Assyrian textual records suggest that Nebuchadnezzer I (who ruled from 1123–1103 B.C.E.), carried out military operations against Elam for the sole purpose of returning the cult image of Marduk to its rightful place in Babylon (eadem, *The Graven Image*, 177).



Figures 5.6–7. Reliefs depicting the deportation of divine images. Top: Sennacherib's Southwest Palace at Nineveh, Room X slab 11, ca. 701 B.C.E. After Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 126 fig. 46; cf. Layard, *A Second Series of Monuments of Nineveh*, pl. 50. Bottom: Tiglath-Pileser III's Palace at Nimrud, slab r-36-lower, ca. 734 B.C.E. After Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 126 fig. 45; cf. Layard, *The Monuments of Nineveh*, pl. 65; cf. Richard David Barnett & Margarete Falkner, *Sculptures*, 29 pls. 88, 92f.

something far more valuable than a work of art. By repatriating the god to its native land, the captors sought to curry good favor with the conquered foes, and more importantly, their deity.

Thus, whether it involves royal monuments or divine statuary, the abduction of art is best understood as an extension of a military practice that was common throughout ANE history, but was especially evident in Neo-Assyria. Specifically, this strategy was designed to limit opposition to further incursions not through mass killings but rather through the reorganization of land and populace.[156] Bahrani contends that this strategy of deportation might also involve the movement of images. In this regard, deporting

[156] Bahrani, *Rituals of War*, 180.

people and abducting images are analogous acts of war designed to reorganize geopolitical space. To put this notion in Gell's anthropological terms, within the network of relationships surrounding ANE war, images functioned as social agents in ways that are normally reserved for enemy combatants. Deporting and relocating images was thus an attempt to disrupt or reorganize previously existing social networks. In this sense, to say that an abducted image has agency is a culturally prescribed way of talking about causation and intentionality within the network of social relationships generated by war.

5.3.2.2. Evaluation

The evidence above suggests that the destruction and theft of images in the context of war cannot simply be explained in terms of politically motivated vandalism or senseless acts of looting. These forms of visual response seem to be predicated on an underlying notion in the Mesopotamian intellectual tradition that visual representations could embody the real presence of the thing or person it depicted. Seen in this light, when invading forces came across the royal monuments and divine statuary of their foes, they acted as if they were encountering the kings and deities themselves.

Thus, the theft and destruction of images in the context of war might best be understood as a type of military strategy that is akin to the abduction and attack of enemy combatants. In capturing or defacing works of art, military forces sought to effect real damage on the bodies of their enemy's kings and deities. Therefore, these curious examples about the life (or indeed, death) of ANE images in the context of war not only provide explicit evidence for Bahrani's understanding of the nature and status of the *ṣalmu* in Mesopotamian visual culture, but they also clarify how the theoretical perspectives of Freedberg and Gell might further inform the ways in which contemporary scholars understand responses to images that seem to blur the lines between representation and reality.

However, the conclusions drawn from the previous sections cannot be uncritically extrapolated to all forms of images and every variety of visual response. The examples discussed in §5.3.2 specifically involve royal and divine images, and Bahrani's discussion focuses on a particular type of image—the *ṣalmu* (§5.3.1). It is conceivable, and indeed likely, that other types of images functioned as a means of conveying information or representing symbolic concepts without being thought of as a pluridimensional manifestation of its referent's presence. Furthermore, even in cases where the king or deity is depicted, ancient viewers did not necessarily believe that the image possessed *all* the qualities of a living being. The lines between reality and representation were not always, nor even completely, effaced.

Similarly, while the mutilation and theft of royal and divine images is certainly not unique to the ancient Near East or even pre-modern societies in general, it should be acknowledged that specific forms of visual response vary somewhat across cultural and historical contexts.[157] Thus, even though it is reasonable to speculate that ancient Israelites exhibited similar (though perhaps not identical) understandings about the power and agency of images as did ancient Mesopotamians, ideally it would be best to constrain the analysis of visual response to a more narrow cultural and historical context. Indeed, the next advancement in iconographic exegesis would be to particularize the findings of this and other topics in the present study for specific periods within the history of ancient Israel / the early church or for specific categories of visual representation found in Syria-Palestine.

5.4. The Implications of Visual Response

As was suggested at the outset of this chapter, theoretical inquires into the life of images and the implications of visual responses touch upon issues and concerns that seem to lie far afield from most work in biblical scholarship, even those that deal with ancient iconography. Nevertheless, the sorts of issues that Mitchell, Freedberg, Gell, and Bahrani raise should challenge biblical scholars, not to mention those interested in ANE art history, archaeology, or religio-historical research more broadly, to think in new ways about the nature and status of ancient images. Put simply, if ancient viewers commonly talked about, related to, and acted upon images as if they were something more than just works of art (and they certainly did), then contemporary scholars should not limit their research to identifying an image's iconographic content or history of style.

These latter issues, no doubt, should remain central to various avenues of research that engage ancient (or modern) art. But at the same time, the role of the ancient viewer—and thus the implications of ancient visual response—should not remain under-theorized. To borrow Mitchell's language, what ancient images (no less than modern ones) want is to be studied in a way that is adequate to their ontological status and social agency.

Implementing such an approach would not only enrich and expand the analytical horizon of iconographic exegesis but it also would establish fruitful points of connection between biblical scholarship and recent advancements in the study of religious visual culture. I explore this latter issue in

[157] Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 150. Yet, Bahrani seems to think that her theory of Mesopotamian images might apply more broadly. She argues as follows: "For the Assyrians, Babylonians, Elamites, *and perhaps others in the ancient Near East*, the image always retained something of the original with it and could even take the place of the represented, occulting it to an extent but at the same time being its presence" (*The Graven Image*, 183; emphasis mine).

more detail in the next chapter of this study. But for now, I want to highlight two specific ways in which theories about the animation of art might directly come to bear on the methods and practices of iconographic exegesis.

First and at a more general level, I suspect that many scholars interested in ancient art—including Izaak de Hulster, whose definition of images I addressed earlier in this chapter—would agree with many of the above observations about the nature and status of the *ṣalmu*. In this sense, my above reflections are not so much designed to introduce a completely new perspective on ANE images. Rather, my goal from the start has been to nuance, develop, and reframe these understandings in light of important contributions to visual theory. That is to say, I am once again interested in orchestrating conversations between contemporary visual culture studies on the one hand and ANE art history and iconographic exegesis on the other.

In my estimation, these conversations can give rise to important implications in terms of methodology. For instance, one of the weaknesses of the iconographic method, at least as it is traditionally conceived, is that it directs very little attention to the role of the observer and, more generally, the notion of visuality or spectatorship.[158] Mitchell contends that Panofsky sometimes treats visuality as a type of "natural, physiological mechanism" that is independent of historical and cultural contexts, and, at other points, Panofsky seems to conceptualize the nature of visual response as something which "can be read directly from the pictorial conventions that express it in 'symbolic forms.'"[159] In other words, for Panofksy—and perhaps some of those who rely on his method—the question of visual response is reduced either to a function of biological vision (i.e., optical perception) or to a description of symbolic content (i.e., iconographic interpretation). In both cases, images, not visuality or visual response, are considered to be the proper subject matter of the iconographic method. The role of the observer is thought to be unrecoverable—if not uninteresting—from a historical-critical perspective.

Yet, as Mitchell, Freedberg, Gell, and Bahrani have shown, the nature of visual response is not unrelated to questions regarding what images are and how they function. In fact, the study of visuality and visual response remains a chief concern within visual theory and the growing field of visual culture studies. It would be possible—and potentially fruitful, in my estimation—for biblical scholars to pursue such questions as well. This would involve not only analyzing the content of certain ANE images but, whenever possible, seeking to evaluate the meaning and significance of visual response—that is, what people did to/with images, how they described what

[158] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 18.
[159] Ibid., 18.

they saw, and why their visual experiences seemed to motivate and structure social interactions.

Attending to such issues does not require one to assume an ideal ancient observer whose perspective and response were unaffected by matters related to gender, class, ideology, education, and so forth.[160] As Mitchell points out, while it is right to suggest that there is no such thing as an ideal observer, it is still possible to locate actual examples of spectatorship in the historical record.[161] Bahrani's research corroborates that it is possible to access examples of ancient visual response, especially those that are recorded in textual materials.[162] Thus, a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies would attend more closely to what Mitchell calls the "unfinished business" of the iconographic method—that is, questions about spectatorship and visual response.[163]

Second, the sorts of perspectives on display in the work of Mitchell, Freedberg, Gell, and Bahrani might also provide a helpful conceptual framework for interpreting certain responses to images found in the Hebrew Bible. I am particularly interested in those cases where biblical authors describe images being destroyed in the context of cultic reform or prophetic discourse. My purpose at this point is not to comment on what these texts might suggest about the nature of Israelite religion or the meaning of the so-called image-ban, though such questions are of great import. For now, I simply want to raise several possibilities regarding what iconoclastic responses to images might suggest about how ancient Israelite viewers (or at least biblical authors) thought about the nature and status of visual representation.

Perhaps the most explicit examples of image violence come from the Deuteronomistic History. As part of their cultic reforms, both Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18:1–6) and Josiah (2 Kgs 23:4–20) are said to have removed from the temple various cultic paraphernalia, including pillars (מצבת), altars (מזבחות), the sacred pole (האשׁרה), the bronze serpent (נחשׁ הנחשׁת), the horses (הסוסים), the chariots of the sun (מרכבות השׁמשׁ), and the vessels (הכלים) made for Baal, Asherah, and all the host of heaven. To be sure, not all of these objects were thought to be divine images, and it is likely that some of them were

[160] This position is evident in the work of Jonathan Crary, who in discussing the role of the observer in nineteenth century Europe, remarks as follows: "Obviously, there was no single nineteenth century observer, no example that can be located empirically" (*Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990], 7).

[161] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 21

[162] Thus, while images can be interpreted in light of other images, textual data often provides valuable information about the nature of visual response. In this regard, I at least somewhat affirm Panofsky's reliance on textual materials in the second level of his image analysis.

[163] Ibid., 18.

deemed to be inappropriate for different theological reasons. Whatever the case, both of these texts from 2 Kings make it clear that Hezekiah's and Josiah's responses reflect single-minded devotion to Yahweh and his commandments (see esp. 2 Kgs 18:5–6; 23:1–3, 24–25).

Perhaps so. But what *else* might these responses suggest? Seen from the vantage point of Gell's anthropology of art, removing cultic objects from the temple might be construed as a way of defusing an aspect of their social agency. Recall that in the externalist strategy, images and other objects obtain agency when humans stipulate for them a role as a social other within a particular network of relationships. In this view, the agency of these objects is not contingent on their visual form, which might account for the fact that Hezekiah and Josiah remove cultic paraphernalia regardless of whether they are iconic or aniconic representations.[164] Furthermore, the externalist mechanism implies that if an object is removed from its social network, it will no longer generate and structure real, physical interactions between an agent (the art object) and a patient (the worshiper). Thus, by removing various objects from the temple, Hezekiah and Josiah would have effectively disrupted a system of social exchange in which inanimate objects were attributed the power and agency of living things.

But Hezekiah and Josiah do more than just remove these objects from the temple. Hezekiah smashes (Piel of √*šbr*) the pillars, cuts down (Qal of √*krt*) the sacred pole, and breaks in pieces (Piel of √*ktt*) the bronze serpent while Josiah burns (Qal of √*śrp*) numerous objects taken out of the temple.[165] In 2 Kings, the destruction of these objects is the natural consequence of cult reform and specifically responds to the instruction given in Deut 7:5. Yet, if removing these objects from the temple could, as Gell would suggest, diffuse their social agency, what motivated such violent acts? What did image violence accomplish that image removal did not?

In his treatment of the history and theory of iconoclastic responses, Freedberg contends that violence toward images is not only fueled by theological, political, or psychological motivations, but also is "predicated in one way or another on the attribution of life to the figure represented."[166] The author of 2 Kings seems to anticipate this very implication. In 2 Kgs

[164] However, certain visual objects associated with the cult of Yahweh, such as the cherubim throne and the ark, are conspicuously *not* removed. Many biblical scholars have explained this situation by noting that the cherubim throne and ark are examples of aniconic representations. In chapter 6 of this study, I evaluate traditional distinctions between iconic and aniconic art in light of more recent approaches to the study of religious visual culture.

[165] Other texts might be noted here as well: David carries off Philistine idols in 2 Sam 5:21; Joram and Jehu burn (Qal of √*śrp*) and demolish (Qal of √*nṭṣ*) the pillar associated with Baal in 2 Kgs 10:26–27; and all of the people break into pieces (Piel of √*šbr*) Baal's altars and images in 2 Kgs 11:18. In addition, the head and hands of the statue of Dagon are cut off while (Qal pass. of √*krt*) in the presence of the ark of God (1 Sam 5:1–5).

[166] Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 415.

19:17–18, Hezekiah prays as follows: "Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have laid waste the nations and their lands, and have hurled their gods into the fire, though they were no gods but the work of human hands—wood and stone—and so they were destroyed." The concessive clause offered in v. 18 (כי לא אלהים המה כי אם מעשׂה ידי־אדם) seems to explicitly deny belief in the animation of art. But, as indicated above, the actions of both Hezekiah and Josiah suggest otherwise. These Judahite kings responded to images in ways that were no less violent than their Neo-Assyrian counterparts. While there are some differences between how images are treated in Israelite cult reform and Mesopotamia warfare, it seems likely that both forms of visual response are predicated on the deep-seated belief that art objects are far more than mediated representations—they are living things that can and must be killed when they are perceived to be a threat.[167]

Other intriguing examples of visual response found in the Hebrew Bible are the so-called idol parodies in Second Isaiah (40:19–20; 41:5–14; 44:6–22) and Jeremiah 10:1–16.[168] Though these texts vary in their specific details, the overarching argument is especially clear in Jeremiah 10. Rather than being gods, cult images are said to be merely the work of human artisans ("worked with an ax by the hands of an artisan," v. 3; cf. v. 9), made from inanimate materials (wood, silver, gold, nails, cf. vv. 3–4, 8–9), and incapable of speaking, seeing, moving, breathing, and doing good or evil (vv. 5, 14).[169] Put simply, they are the ontological antithesis of the living God (אלהים חיים, v. 10).

Interestingly, the idol parodies do not seem to draw on the various legal traditions that prohibit the making of cult images (cf. Exod 20:4, 23; 34:17; Lev 19:4; 26:1; Deut 4:15–19; 5:8–9; 27:15). Instead, several biblical scholars, including Michael B. Dick and Robert Carroll, suggest that the idol parodies show knowledge of the ancient Mesopotamian *mīs pî* ceremony.[170] However, Dick and Carroll argue that for polemical reasons the biblical authors deliberately distort Mesopotamian religion and its understanding of the animation of art. Carroll puts it this way:

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[167] Interestingly, several of the verbs used to describe the destruction of images in 2 Kings 18 and 23 are used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible to describe violence against human agents. See, for instance, the use of √*krt* in Jer 11:19, √*šbr* in Isa 63:6, and √*śrp* in Judg 15:6. The flexibility of these verbs might further indicate a tendency of biblical authors to conceptualize material objects as animate beings.

[168] One might potentially add to this list several texts from the minor prophets, including Hos 8:4–6, 13:2–3, Mic 5:12–13, and Hab 2:18–19, as well as Ps 115:4–11 (cf. Ps 135:15–20).

[169] Michael B. Dick notes that similar arguments against the conflation of cult image and deity are found in ancient Hellenistic literature. For a discussion, see Dick's essay, "Prophetic Parodies of Making the Cult Image," in *Born in Heaven Made on Earth*, esp. 30–45.

[170] Dick, "Prophetic Parodies," in *Born in Heaven Made on Earth*, 1–53; and Carroll, "The Aniconic God," 51–64.

> On any reading of the relevant [idol parody] passages it is quite clear that the Old Testament writers did not understand the nature of their neighbours' religions. Few, if any, groups imaged their cult images to be gods, or even representatives of their gods. . . . Lacking any appreciation of the symbolic value of images, and without realizing that the cult of images belonged to a belief in personal gods, Israel entirely failed to come to grips with the essence of polytheism.[171]

To be sure, the idol parodies do not fully capture the nuance and subtlety with which ancient Mesopotamian texts describe the relationship between cult image and deity. Nevertheless, in light of Bahrani's research on the nature and status of the *ṣalmu*, Carroll, and to a lesser extent, Dick, overstate the matter when they conclude that the idol parodies reflect an inadequate understanding of Mesopotamian image theology. In fact, it might well be the case that the idol parodies are responding directly to the belief in ANE visual culture that the boundaries between representation and reality could become blurred, if not effaced, when it came to divine images. In other words, the biblical authors go to such great lengths to lampoon the nature and status of idols precisely because it was quite common in the ancient world to see images as not only "imitations of life" but as having lives of their own.

Furthermore, certain aspects of Gell's visual theory can generate new insight into the underlying logic of the idol parodies. For instance, in reference to idols, Isa 44:18 states, "They do not know, nor do they comprehend; for their eyes are shut, so that they cannot see, and their minds as well, so that they cannot understand." Such statements might simply underscore the notion that idols, as mere inanimate objects, lack various sense perceptions and thus should be considered inept and ineffective. This logic is also evident in Ps 115:5–7, which says of idols: "They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell."

However, what is curious to note in these examples is that even though idols are described as being mute, blind, deaf, and anosmic, they nevertheless have the external features associated with these sense perceptions. This might suggest that ancient viewers, not unlike Gell, recognized that certain parts of an image imply a sense of interiority, and with it, social agency. Thus, to say that "[idols] have eyes, but they do not see" (Ps 115:5; cf. Ps 135:16; Isa 44:18) might be understood as a way of "targeting" the eyes of ancient images. In other words, to claim that an image is blind not only parodies its lack of perception but also disassociates the analogical link between the external body of the image and its internal mind/self. By "blind-

[171] Dick, "Prophetic Parodies," 53.

ing" idols through these literary descriptions, the biblical authors treat images in a manner that is not altogether different than—and indeed, is remarkably similar to—what ANE soldiers do when they deliberately gouged out the eyes of their enemy's royal monuments and divine statues.

The examples of visual response discussed thus far primarily deal with instances of image destruction. Though less common, the Hebrew Bible also gives some evidence of the practice of image theft.[172] In Judges 18, six hundred men of the Danite clan armed with the weapons of war set out to reclaim land in the hill country of Ephraim. In the process, they steal Micah's cult image (vv. 16–17) and set it up for themselves in another city (v. 31). Another possible example is the account of Amaziah's military campaign in 2 Chr 25:5–16. In this story, Amaziah captures the gods of the people of Seir and sets them up as his own (v. 14). Also potentially relevant is the story of Rachel stealing Laban's household gods (תרפים) in Genesis 31.[173] Yet, the clearest example of this practice is found in 1 Samuel 4, where the Philistines defeat the Israelites, capture the ark of God, bring it back to Ashdod, and set it up in the temple of Dagon. In light of the evidence discussed above, I believe it is best to interpret these instances of image theft not in terms of vandalism or looting but rather as a distinct operation of war somewhat akin to the abduction of enemy combatants.

A final example involves the oracle against Moab in Jeremiah 48. In describing how the land of Moab and its people will be laid waste, the prophet proclaims that "Chemosh shall go out into exile, with his priests and attendants" (ויצא כמיש בגולה כהניו ושריו יחד, v. 7). What is striking here is that the author of Jeremiah 48 uses language associated with human deportation (יצא גולה, cf. Jer 29:16; Zech 14:2) to describe the removal of the cult statue of Chemosh from the land. Drawing on Bahrani's previously discussed theory, one might understand the punishment aimed at Moab as involving the reorganization of geopolitical space in ways that required the deportation of both human agents and material objects. While it is not clear if the exile of Chemosh's statute constitutes a distinct military strategy, it is evident that in this description of visual response, a work of art is treated in a very similar manner as human captives.

These reflections hardly provide an exhaustive theory of visual response in the Hebrew Bible. They do, however, suggest several ways in which visual theory might shed light on how ancient Israelite viewers understood the

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[172] While there is no clear archaeological evidence from the Levant of this phenomenon, the Amarna letters make several references to foreign troops seizing the gods of certain cities. For further discussion, see Theodore J. Lewis, "Syro-Palestinian Iconography and Divine Images," in *Cult Image and Divine Representation in the Ancient Near East* (ed. Neal H. Walls; American Schools of Oriental Research 10; Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2005), 100.

[173] For further discussion about the nature of these household gods, see Theodore J. Lewis, "תרפים," *TDOT* 15:777–89.

nature of visual representation, and with it, the very question with which I began this chapter: *What is an image?* This brief analysis also raises a set of questions about the role and function of images in ancient Israelite religion. For instance: Why were some images associated with Yahweh, such as the cherubim throne or the ark, deemed acceptable while others were disallowed or destroyed? How did ancient Israelites attempt to "visualize" Yahweh in spite of legal traditions that banned the production of divine images? And, more broadly, how might religio-historical research incorporate insights from the study of religious visual culture? These matters will be taken in up in the next chapter of this study.

Chapter 6

Seeing is Believing: Visual Culture and the Study of Israelite Religion

"Even in cultures (such as Islam and Judaism) with prevailing interdicts against anthropomorphic representation, and an apparent emphasizing of word over image, of the written over the figured, the will to image figuratively—even anthropomorphically—cannot be suppressed."[1]

"My overarching argument is that the study of religious images is best undertaken as the study of ways of seeing. This means that visual practice is the primary datum alongside images themselves and that the two, together, insofar as religion happens visually, constitute the visual medium of belief."[2]

6.1. From Visual Objects to Visual Culture

The utility of iconographic exegesis as a method of religio-historical analysis is predicated on the notion that images in art, much like words in a text, can offer a window into a given culture's religious beliefs and practices. For this reason, scholars in and beyond the Fribourg School are now increasingly looking to ancient Near Eastern iconographic remains as a primary source in the study of Israelite religion. These iconographic approaches have yielded numerous important insights into questions concerning the emergence of Yahwistic monotheism, the role of the goddess, and a host of other issues pertaining to the comparative cultural and historical contexts of ancient Israelite religion. In light of these developments, Mark S. Smith claims that the use of ancient visual data alongside texts and other forms of material culture represents one of the most significant methodological advancements in the study of Israelite religion in recent years.[3]

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[1] David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Visual Response* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989), 55.

[2] David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 6.

[3] For further discussion, see the preface to the second edition of Mark S. Smith's *The Early History of God* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), xvi–xvii.

Despite these promising developments, efforts to integrate visual evidence into the study of ancient Israelite religion are still in their initial stages. Specifically, while recent contributions to this field have been more apt to examine particular visual objects (e.g., seals, amulets, coins, monumental reliefs, etc.), they have yet to more thoroughly analyze the broader realm of visual culture. While visual culture certainly includes the sort of images currently utilized in the study of Israelite religion, it also encompasses the full expanse of agents, institutions, conceptualities, practices, and habits that structure and inform how images are understood and responded to. Thus construed, the study of visual culture would broaden the analytical scope of religio-historical research by taking into account not only individual visual artifacts but also the whole realm of visuality and, with it, the cultural and social dimensions of sight.

Since the early 1990s, the study of visual culture has blossomed as a topic of interest in various disciplines across the humanities and social sciences. The impetus to study visual culture emerged out of a more general shift towards the academic study of culture itself. This "cultural turn," which began in Britain in the 1950s and then flourished in North America in the 1970s, prompted increased scrutiny concerning the ways in which cultural forces influence every day life, individual experiences, social relationships, and institutions.[4] Early practitioners of cultural studies were neither exclusively nor even especially interested in visual materials. However, they were concerned with the ways in which all forms of signification—whether texts, images, embodied acts, rituals, or performances—not only reflect social and cultural influences but also function to create the worlds in which people live in and care about. In this sense, the cultural turn gave birth, though somewhat belatedly, to the study of visual culture by providing the theoretical and methodological frameworks for thinking about the entire visual field (images, visual practices, visual experiences, ways of seeing, etc.) as a cultural field.

As an academic field in its own right, visual culture studies is a loosely defined and largely interdisciplinary mode of inquiry "that regards the visual image as the focal point in the processes through which meaning is made in a cultural context."[5] While scholars of visual culture are not beholden to a single methodology or theoretical vantage point, their studies tend to be marked by at least three broad concerns.

First, in comparison to most traditional modes of art history, visual culture studies is not interested in western canons of "high" art—that is, paintings, sculptures, or other museum pieces that are primarily meant to be ap-

[4] For a fuller introduction to the history and development of the study of visual culture, see Margarita Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual After the Cultural Turn* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005); and James Elkins, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

[5] Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture*, 1.

preciated for their aesthetic quality and/or historical and intellectual significance. Rather, visual culture studies looks to a far more diverse and eclectic array of images, including popular visual media (TV, film, internet images, advertisements, etc.) as well as everyday "nonart" objects (graffiti, cartoons, product labels, architecture, landscapes, rituals, clothing, mass-produced kitsch, etc.). Moreover, the study of visual culture also tends to direct attention to images produced in diverse cultural contexts. Instead of focusing on, say, the paintings of French Impressionists or sculptures from the Italian Renaissance, a scholar of visual culture might study handmade quilts from southern Appalachia, youth street art from Brazil, or the landscape architecture of Vietnamese Buddhist temples. In this way, visual culture studies "democratize[s] the community of visual artifacts by considering all objects—and not just those classified as art—as having aesthetic and ideological complexity."[6]

Second, the study of visual culture tends to analyze not only a broader expanse of visual objects but also the social, cultural, institutional, and intellectual practices that put those images to use. In this sense, visual culture studies is a practice-centered discipline rather than an artist- or object-centered discipline. Underlying this focus on visual practices is the conviction that what an image means is not strictly determined by an analysis of its formal qualities or even the artist's background and intention. Rather, it is also a function of the image's reception and use, and thus the question of visual meaning cannot be isolated from the liturgical settings, everyday spaces, and embodied performances in which images function. Put simply, a visual culture approach would stress that what people do with images is as analytically interesting and relevant as what their original authors intended for those images to express iconographically or aesthetically.

Third, a visual culture approach emphasizes that visual perception is not only a biological phenomenon but also a cultural one. Seeing, in other words, entails more than just the lens of the eye focusing light on the photoreceptive cells of the retina, which in turn convert patterns of light into neural signals. Rather, vision is a culturally shaped habit, and as such, distinct "ways of seeing" are shaped by education, cultural expectations, social context, and even religious beliefs. Two implications follow from this perspective. On the one hand, visual perception is not a stable, natural, or universal experience. Vision itself has a history, one that is informed by social and cultural forces and that fluctuates over time and place. Thus, not everyone with sight will see the same objects in the same way. On the other hand, the claim of visual culture studies is not just that art reflects culture but that what one sees in art in turn constructs one's social and cultural worlds. The characteristic ways in which a given culture depicts concepts related to

[6] Dikovitskaya, "Visual Studies," in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (vol 2; 2nd ed; ed. by Michael Kelly; Oxford University Press; online).

power, sexuality, gender, desire, fear, affluence, and the divine function to shape distinct modes of seeing and interacting with political, ethical, economic, social, and theological realities. In this sense, the proper subject matter of visual culture studies is not just a wide variety of visual objects but also *visuality*—that is, the effects, habits, gazes, expectations, and responses generated by images in a given social, cultural, historical, and/or religious context.

As much attention as these and other dimensions of visual culture have received across the humanities and even in religious studies, they have not yet been fully engaged when it comes to the study of ancient Israelite religion.[7] And perhaps for good reason. As noted earlier (§5.2.3), issues pertaining to visual response and reception are difficult to track when dealing with ancient cultures. Unlike scholars interested in *contemporary* visual culture, historians of Israelite religion cannot conduct surveys of or interviews with ancient viewers so as to ascertain in an unambiguous and exhaustive fashion the social and cultural dimensions of vision.[8] At best, a scholar of ancient Israelite religion must rely on indirect, comparative, and analogical evidence when drawing conclusions about how a specific art object might have been responded to in a certain setting or how distinct modes of seeing were generated from the ways in which concepts such as royal power, violence, and divine presence were characteristically displayed in ancient art.

Nevertheless, visual culture is not a unique feature of the modern world.[9] Much like today, vision in the ancient world was not a mere function of biology but was shaped by social and cultural factors. Conversely, ancient art, no less than contemporary popular media, participated in the social and cultural construction of reality. It is also possible—and indeed, probable—that ancient viewers, at least on occasion, interpreted, responded to, and employed an art object in ways that were not entirely consistent with the intentions of those who originally produced or commissioned it. And neither is it the case that images were any less prominent in ancient culture than they are in modern culture. In fact, based on evidence regarding low textual literacy rates in the ancient world (§2.2), it might even be the case that relative to texts, ancient images would have played a more significant role in the everyday experience and cultural competency of the

[7] For a notable exception, see Christoph Uehlinger, "Approaches to Visual Culture and Religion: Disciplinary Trajectories, Interdisciplinary Connections and Some Suggestions for Further Progress," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 27 (2015): 384–422.

[8] Though it should be noted that surveys and interviews of contemporary viewers are also not likely to produce *unambiguous and exhaustive* conclusions about the social and cultural dimensions of sight.

[9] Elkins, *Visual Studies*, 39, 83, and *passim*.

average observer than they do today.[10] Put simply, images, visual practices, and visual perception were no less mixed up in the broader realm of culture in seventh-century Israel than they are in twenty-first century America.

For this reason, and in spite of the above mentioned methodological challenges, it would be appropriate—and potentially fruitful—to apply a visual culture approach to the study of ancient Israelite religion.[11] Doing so would not only advance specific areas of religio-historical research but it would also demonstrate another crucial dimension of a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies. In order to do so, I first introduce two dimensions of religious visual culture as articulated through the influential work of David Morgan: the *visual medium of belief* (§6.2.1) and the *religious apparatus of sight* (§6.2.2). While Morgan mainly applies these concepts to the analysis of contemporary religion, they have the potential to shed new light on—or better yet, give sight to—two very closely related topics in research on Israelite religion: the study of Israelite aniconism (§6.3) and the search for Yahweh's image (§6.4). In taking up these latter two issues as case studies, I demonstrate how a concern for visual practices and religious ways of seeing, respectively, can reframe the way in which scholars evaluate these important and vexing topics in the study of Israelite religion.

6.2. Dimensions of Religious Visual Culture

Both religion and visual culture represent vast areas of study in their own right. Combined, they engender an even wider array of interests and topics. Rather than being unified around a single analytical strategy, the study of religious visual culture draws heavily upon insights generated by numerous other disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, memory studies, art history, and neurobiology, to name just a few. My intention here is not to offer an exhaustive survey of the ever-growing body of literature that explores the intersection of religion and visual culture.[12] Instead, I aim to de-

[10] It should be noted, however, that the average observer in ancient Israel would have encountered far fewer images than the average observer in most parts of the world today. But, the same would be true of their exposure to written materials. As such, the more pertinent questions have to do with the relative quantities and importance of textual and visual materials in the ancient world in comparison to the modern world. For further discussion, see §2.2.

[11] While the focus of this chapter is on ancient Israelite religion, much of the same could be said of early Church history or any number of other religio-historical contexts.

[12] For a representative example of what is now a rather large body of literature see, for instance, Joseph Sciorra, "Yard Shrines and Sidewalk Altars of New York's Italian Americans," in *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* (ed. Tomas Carter and Bernard L. Herman; Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989), 185–99; Gregor T. Goethals, "Ritual and the Representation of Power in High and Popular Art," *JRitSt* 4 (1990): 149–77; Ewa

scribe some of the persistent concerns of this field, especially as they emerge through the work of David Morgan, a religious studies scholar who specializes in the intersection of religion, art, and visual culture.

In his many articles, books, and edited volumes, Morgan investigates how materiality and visuality constitute "a compelling register in which to examine belief."[13] He does so by exploring a fascinating assortment of art objects, ranging from Warner Sallman's popular mid-twentieth-century paintings of Jesus to illustrated Sunday School primers from Protestant churches. Like most scholars of visual culture, Morgan also consistently looks beyond images themselves to the religious performances, rituals, spaces, feelings, effects, and responses that emerge from and rely on the visual arts.

In this sense, Morgan's research differs somewhat from traditional art historical approaches to Christian or Jewish images. The latter have primarily focused on identifying theologies conveyed by certain images (e.g., depictions of the resurrection in early Eastern Orthodox iconography), the way in which particular works of art interpret biblical stories (e.g., Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*), or even how specific artistic styles (such as abstract expressionism) are capable of accessing the sublime or evoking a sense of divine mystery.[14] While such considerations intersect

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Kuryluk, *Veronica and Her Cloth: History, Symbolism, and Structure of a 'True' Image* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1991); Sally M. Promey, *Spiritual Spectacles: Vision and Image in Mid-Nineteenth Century Shakerism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); S. Brent Plate, ed., *Religion, Art, and Visual Culture: A Cross-Cultural Reader* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); and William Arweck and Elisabeth Keenan, *Materializing Religion: Expression, Performance, and Ritual* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2006); and numerous books and edited volumes by David Morgan (see below).

[13] Morgan, "Introduction: The Matter of Belief," in *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (ed. Morgan; New York: Routledge, 2010), 8. See also, idem, *Icons of American Protestantism: The Art of Warner Sallman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); *Protestants and Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture, and the Age of American Mass Production* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); *The Sacred Gaze* (2005); *The Lure of Images: A History of Religion and Visual Media in American* (New York: Routledge, 2007); and *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). Morgan has also co-edited volumes with Sally M. Promey (*The Visual Culture of American Religions* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001]) and James Elkins (*Re-Enchantment* [New York: Routledge, 2009]).

[14] To be sure, analyses of these and other such topics had made important contributions to the study of religion and the arts. See, for instance, John Dominic Crossan's 2012 presidential address at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, "A Vision of Divine Justice: The Resurrection of Jesus in Eastern Christian Iconography," *JBL* (2013): 5–

with some aspects of religious visual culture, Morgan pursues a slightly different path. The unifying thread that runs throughout his research is his interest in two closely related topics: (1) the *visual medium of belief*—that is, how religious faith is mediated, mobilized, and maintained in and through visual materials and visual practices; and (2) the *religious apparatus of sight*—that is, how visual perception and ways of seeing are conditioned by prior religious beliefs and moral frameworks. Taken together, these two areas of research attempt to organize and describe two important dimensions of religious visual culture.

6.2.1. The Visual Medium of Belief

Throughout his research, but especially in the introduction to *The Sacred Gaze* (2005), Morgan challenges the tendency to think about belief strictly in terms of propositional statements or verbal assent to theological doctrines.[15] In Morgan's estimation, this "creedalist" understanding of belief reflects a narrow way of thinking about religion, and as such, it does not offer an adequate framework for investigating how religion is actually experienced in most circumstances.[16] Belief, in Morgan's opinion, "does not exist in an abstract, discursive space, in an empyrean realm of pure procla-

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32; and John Dillenberger's 1987 presidential address at the Annual Meeting of the American Academic of Religion ("Visual Arts and Religion," *JAAR* 61 [1988]: 199–212.

[15] Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 6–15. For a related discussion, see idem, "Introduction: The Matter of Belief," in *Religion and Material Culture*, 1–18.

[16] Idem, *The Sacred Gaze*, 7. In his effort to call into question more creedal or doctrine-centered approaches to the study of religion, Morgan follows the previous work of other historians and anthropologists. For instance, Rodney Needham argues that the Christian concept of belief does not provide a universally applicable framework for the study of other religious systems (*Belief, Language and Experience* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1972]). Likewise, Malcolm Ruel and Wilfred Cantwell Smith have both attempted to trace the linguistic history of the word "believe" from its original meaning ("to love" or "to hold dear") to the more recent notion of holding an opinion or set of ideas. See, for instance, Malcolm Ruel, *Belief, Ritual, and the Securing of Life: Reflexive Essays on a Bantu Religion* [Leiden: Brill, 1997]; and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979]). More specifically, Jon Butler has argued that Protestant (and especially Puritan) theologies have unduly influenced scholarly conceptions of religious belief. In Butler's estimation, a "Puritan model" of religious research tends to dismiss aspects of other faith traditions, including Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Judaism, that do not explicitly reflect the Protestant preference for words and creeds over images and embodied practices. For further discussion, see Jon Butler, "Historiographic Heresy: Catholicism as a Model for American Religious History," in *Belief in History: Innovative Approaches to European and American Religion* (Thomas Kselman, ed.; South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 286–309.

mation, 'I Believe.'"[17] Rather, even in Protestant communities where iconoclastic tendencies have often run strong, belief routinely happens not only through what people *say* (i.e., words and creeds) but also through what they *see*—paintings and photographs, architecture and landscapes, performances and rituals, liturgical garments and illuminated manuscripts. Morgan describes these and other material objects as the *visual medium of belief*, the created matter through which people explore the meaning of the spiritual world and negotiate their relationship with the divine.

In stressing the point that belief is a mediated phenomenon, Morgan underscores the ways in which religion takes shape and is expressed through a broad array of material objects, embodied practices, and sensory experiences.[18] These visual articulations of faith are often produced and consumed apart from the official sanction of ecclesial bodies, and they are as likely to take the form of mass-produced kitsch or roadside billboards as they are finely carved sculptures or ornate altarpieces. Regardless of their form, these materials have the capacity to facilitate belief by cultivating religious feelings and sensibilities, bringing the mind into a deeper awareness of the person or place which is depicted, activating shared memories and collective identities, and absorbing one's consciousness in a meditative state of prayer or self-reflection.

While present-day religious communities often visualize their beliefs through a host of modern digital technologies (videos, computer generated graphics, mass produced images, etc.), the fact that belief happens in and through visual media is not a unique characteristic of contemporary Western culture. In her book *Material Christianity*, historian Colleen McDannell cogently argues that "'genuine' religion has always been expressed and

[17] Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 8.

[18] Ibid., 8. In describing belief as an embodied practice and sensory experience, Morgan draws on the philosophy of David Hume and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Though in varying ways, these philosophers contend that there is a close connection between abstract cognition and religious belief on the one hand, and the human body and physical experience on the other. This perspective, which is latent in much of Morgan's work, has been further substantiated by more recent work in neurobiology. Antonio Damasio, for instance, affirms that all levels of consciousness are grounded in the brain's physical arrangement of synapses and neural pathways. For further discussion, see Damasio's *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Human Consciousness* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1999). Likewise, the connection between vision and cognition is explored by V. S. Ramachandran (*A Brief Tour of Human Consciousness: From Imposter Poodles to Purple Numbers* [New York: Pi, 2004]) and, though much earlier, Rudolf Arnheim (*Visual Thinking* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969]). A more specific treatment of the connection between the brain and belief can also be found in Michael R. Trimble's *The Soul in the Brain: The Cerebral Basis of Language, Art, and Belief* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007) and Mark Turner's *The Artful Mind: Cognitive Science and the Riddle of Human Creativity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

made real with objects, architecture, art, and landscapes."[19] Religion scholars William Arweck and Elisabeth Keenan strike a similar chord when they remark, "The human mind and hand . . . are turned doggedly down the generations to the creation of countless material modes of expressing religious sensibility, identity, and belonging."[20] In other words, "When dealing with the things of the spirit, matter matters inordinately."[21]

Morgan develops Arweck and Keenan's argument one step further. He begins with the assumption that visual materials cannot be isolated from questions about the liturgical settings, everyday spaces, and embodied performances in which they function.[22] The analysis of religious visual culture is thus interested not only in material objects but also in the routines, customs, habits, and responses that give those objects their spiritual meaning, power, and efficacy.[23] In this way, Morgan believes that "visual practice is the primary datum alongside images themselves and that the two, together, insofar as religion happens visually, constitute the visual medium of belief."[24]

This dual emphasis on visual data *and* visual practices is especially evident in the general description of *Material Religion*, one of the leading peer-reviewed academic journals in the area of religious visual culture:

> *Material Religion* . . . seeks to explore how religion happens in material culture—images, devotional and liturgical objects, architecture and sacred space, works of art and mass-produced artifacts. No less important than these material forms are the many different practices that put them to work. Ritual, communication, ceremony, instruction, meditation, propaganda, pilgrimage, display, magic, liturgy and interpretation constitute many of the practices whereby religious material culture constructs the worlds of belief.[25]

While not uninterested in art historical or iconographic approaches, this journal attends to important issues concerning how images participate in the social and cultural construction of reality.[26] By stressing the social function and effect of images, the editors of *Material Religion* (one of whom is Morgan) emphasize the cultural work images do to consolidate national and spiritual identities, shape a sense of piety and devotion, organize religious rituals and ceremonies, and so forth. In doing so, this journal does not by

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[19] McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 272.

[20] Arweck and Keenan, *Materializing Religion*, 1.

[21] Ibid., 1.

[22] Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 32, 33, 52.

[23] Ibid., 3.

[24] Ibid., 6.

[25] See: http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?show=aimsScope&journalCode=rfmr20#.V0NTypMrKV4 (accessed 5/23/2016).

[26] Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 30.

any means dismiss more traditional concerns with an image's production, material characteristics, or iconographic content. Rather, it seeks to cultivate a form of scholarly discourse that is centered on visual *practices* as well as visual *objects*. Morgan sums up this perspective well when he describes a visual culture approach as one that "wishes to scrutinize the social apparatus that creates and deploys the object, the gaze that apprehends the image in the social operation of seeing."[27]

Morgan offers several examples of what it might look like to analyze the visual medium of belief. In the second chapter of *The Sacred Gaze*, Morgan delineates some of the particular ways in which images are put to use in religious contexts.[28] Specifically, he constructs a typology of image use that aims to capture "everything that a [religious] person or community does with and by means of an image."[29] In brief, the following categories account for how visual practices structure relations among human beings, material objects, and the spiritual world by attempting to:

(1) *order space and time* by identifying certain locations as sacred (temples, pilgrimage sites, spaces within the home; see **fig. 6.1**) and marking specific occasions as spiritually significant (birth, death, baptism, ordination);

(2) *imagine community* by cultivating a shared sense of identity though the display of common emblems (the cross, the star of David) and well known pictorial narratives (the Last Supper, the ascension of Elijah);

(3) *communicate with the divine* as when statues or other cult objects are prayed to, offered gifts, fed, and consulted through practices of divination;

(4) *embody forms of communion with the divine* as when icons of a saint are believed to confer blessings or when a consecration ceremony is thought to enable an image to manifest the living presence of a deity (cf. §5.2.1.2);

(5) *collaborate with other forms of representation* especially in the form of objects that blend word and image, such as illuminated Bibles, amulets with biblical inscriptions, or ornate calligrams (a

[27] Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 32. To a certain degree, I have already anticipated some of Morgan's practice-oriented concerns in chapter 5 of this study. There I analyzed how ancient viewers talked about and responded to ancient art, especially in the context of war. As a type of visual practice, these patterns of response function as a primary source for understanding what ancient viewers believed about the nature, power, and agency of visual representation.

[28] For further discussion, see ibid., 48–74.

[29] Ibid., 32, 55.

type of imagetext in which written words are arranged to form various artistic representations; see **fig. 6.2**);

(6) *influence thought and behavior* whether through the instructional use of illustrations in children's literature or the apotropaic function of certain images when worn on the body as a charm, displayed in the home in the form of a hamsa (a hand-shaped amulet; see **fig. 6.3**), or carried into battle as a protective emblem; and

(7) *displace rival images* as is the case when certain visual signs are damaged, destroyed, or removed in the context of cult reforms, theological controversies, or even military operations (cf. §5.3.2.1).

More could be said about these particular categories, not to mention how they might be adjusted to reflect the specific practices of Israelite religion.[30] For now, I want to highlight three of its broader implications as they relate to Morgan's analysis of the visual medium of belief.

First, Morgan contends that there is no one-to-one correspondence between visual materials and the practices that employ them. A given image can be used in a variety of different ways by different religious communities, and it even can be used in numerous different ways within the same community. As Morgan puts it, "images do what their users require of them, which may involve many things at once."[31] For instance, hamsas (**fig. 6.3**) blend word and image (category #5). But in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, they also are thought to provide protection (#6) by warding off the evil eye and/or to confer blessings (#4) by boosting the fertility and health of pregnant women and mothers.[32]

In other contexts, the hamsa can symbolize national identity (#2) as is the case in the national emblem of the Republic of Algeria, which depicts a simple hamsa that is surrounded by other images and an inscription in Arabic. As a result, when analyzing the visual medium of belief, scholars not only must enumerate discrete functional categories of image use but they must also attend to the ways in which multiple visual practices can apply to the same image.

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[30] Morgan stresses that the particular categories enumerated in his typology are derived from inductive observations, not philosophical speculation. As a result, Morgan admits that "the list is incomplete and will need to expand as evidence requires," or as I might add, historical contexts change (*The Sacred Gaze*, 36).

[31] Ibid., 73.

[32] Although the general form of the hamsa is relatively consistent across religious communities, it is known by different names: the hand of Miriam (in Judaism), the hand of Fatima (in Islam), and the Hand of Mary (in Christianity). Use of the hamsa predates each of these traditions and can be traced to ancient Mesopotamia.

Figures 6.1–3. Top: An ornamental plaque that is traditionally hung on the eastern wall of Jewish homes (thus the inscription: *mizraḥ* = "east") to indicate the direction of daily prayer. Bottom left: Islamic Bismillah calligram in the shape of a pear. Bottom right: a hamsa, also known as the "hand of Miriam" in Jewish use. The Hebrew letters חי are found encircled in the upper center of the palm (referring to the Hebrew word for "life").[33]

Conversely, the same visual practice can utilize various different types of images. While Morgan's typology specifically focuses on how religious images are put to use, many of his categories could apply equally well to nonreligious images. Morgan admits, "If one were to replace *divine* in the third and fourth [categories] with *tradition* or *civilization* or *nation* or *the past*, there would be no difference between the range of functions ascribed to religious images and those ascribed to a great variety of nonreligious

[33] In fig. 6.2., the body of the pear reads: *bismillāhi raḥmāni raḥīm* ("In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful"); the right leaf reads: *qāla allāh taʾālā* ("The sublime God said"); the left leaf reads: *wa innahu min Sulaymān* ("And it is from Solomon"). In fig. 6.3., the three downward pointing fingers are thought to double as the Hebrew letter שׁ, the first letter of the divine name Shaddai.

images."[34] Therefore, scholars should not *a priori* assume that different types of images are always utilized in different ways or that certain iconographic themes or subject matter rigidly determine whether an image is "religious." In fact, it is often the case that worshipers respond to and deploy a wide variety of visual representations in a very similar fashion. As I discuss below, if a similar situation can be shown to obtain in the ancient world, then it will become imperative for biblical historians to assess not only *what* types of images existed in ancient Israel but *how* various forms of representation were put to use and responded to.

Second, one of the main contributions of Morgan's typology is the way in which it stresses that what makes a particular image religious is not only, or even primarily, its subject matter or iconographic content. Equally important in this determination are the social, cultural, and intellectual practices that put an image to use.[35] It must be admitted that individual observers might consider the content of a certain image to be inherently religious apart from any consideration of visual practice. And, at least in some cases, how an image is used is key to what it depicts.[36] Nevertheless, through ethnographic studies of visual practices and/or observations about how communities describe art objects in written records, it is evident that images are sometimes used and responded to in ways that are not directly related to their intrinsic content or intended purpose.

This happens, for instance, in situations in which the imagery of indigenous religions is taken over by missionaries and redeployed for the purposes of Christian worship and devotion.[37] As a result, one of the chief goals of Morgan's typology is "to suggest how much the meaning of an image depends on the ritual or practice that employs it in the temple, home, or community."[38] Extrapolating from this point, I later argue (§6.3.2) that what makes a religion aniconic or iconic is not only its artistic preferences but also the nature of its religious practices. In this way, while Morgan primarily deals with contemporary visual culture, his analytical perspective may also be fruitfully applied to the study of ANE art and religion.

Third, what is clearly evident in Morgan's typology is that "[t]he idea of religion itself is largely unintelligible outside its incarnation in material expressions."[39] This observation is significant, especially in light of the re-

[34] Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 55.

[35] Ibid., 31, 55.

[36] Ibid., 73.

[37] The opposite phenomenon can also occur—that is, indigenous communities can repurpose Christian imagery for use in other religious traditions. For more on both of these situations, see the following chapters in Morgan's *The Sacred Gaze:* "The Violence of Seeing: Idolatry and Iconoclasm," 115–46; and "The Circulation of Images in Mission History," 147–87.

[38] Ibid., 73.

[39] Arweck and Keenan, *Materializing Religion*, 2–3.

peated efforts made by Christians (and to a certain extent, Jews) to do violence to images whether through physically destroying them, proscribing their place in worship, or punishing those who use them.[40] Although iconoclastic efforts have been quite extreme at various points throughout Christian history, they have never completely eliminated the impulse to materialize religion in and through visual media. To anticipate my argument in §6.3 much of the same can be said about Israelite religion. However one comes to understand the image ban in the Hebrew Bible, ancient Israelites persisted in "the will to image" through a wide variety of visual media and material objects.[41]

6.2.2. The Religious Apparatus of Sight

If the first dimensions of religious visual culture challenges certain assumptions about the nature of belief—that it is primarily expressed through words and creeds—then the second seeks to reorient perspectives concerning the nature of sight. Like other visual culture theorists, Morgan insists that seeing entails more than just laying one's eyes on something or passively receiving sensory data.[42] Rather, seeing is a thoroughly engaged, purposeful, and constructive activity. As Morgan puts it, seeing is "a way of making order, of remembering, and of engaging people and the material world in relationships."[43]

Another way of saying this is that visual experiences are always structured and organized by a system of epistemological lenses, cultural knowledge, and social experiences that constitute what I refer to as the "apparatus of sight." I prefer this term primarily because "apparatus" has the potential to capture three different aspects of sight: (1) the *optical*—that is, the eye as the bodily apparatus of perception; (2) the *cultural*—that is, the habits and customs that structure the mechanisms of visual interpretation; and (3) the *social*—that is, the complex network of relationships in which specific acts of seeing take place.[44] Though Morgan does not explic-

[40] For further discussion of violent responses to images in Mesopotamian warfare and the Hebrew Bible, see §5.3.2 and §5.4, respectively.

[41] A similar view is reflected in the epigraph to this chapter from David Freedberg's *The Power of Images.*

[42] Morgan, *The Embodied Eye*, 70.

[43] Idem, *The Sacred Gaze*, 48.

[44] As someone who works closely with biblical texts, I am also tempted to think of the apparatus of sight in terms of the *critical apparatus* of variant readings and other textual notes that accompany scholarly editions of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. In bringing into focus the social history and effects of images, the idea of an apparatus of sight would be a way to account for the fact that later viewers often attribute meanings to images that diverge from what was intended by its original producers. If these meanings are thought

itly use the phrase "apparatus of sight," he likewise affirms that visual experiences are selectively filtered and arranged according to certain underlying social and cultural assumptions. In this sense, seeing images—or anything else for that matter—is never simply a function of biological perception, nor is it always rigidly governed by knowledge of iconographic conventions or art historical contexts. As Morgan contends, seeing is a means by which viewers, whether consciously or unconsciously, search for what they hope to see or have been trained to look for.[45]

In applying this perspective to the study of religion, Morgan stresses that devout viewers not only materialize belief in and through what they see but they also are predisposed to see in an image what they already believe. In other words, religious ideas routinely condition how people process visual data and can even enable them to recognize the presence of certain numinous qualities in an image that others fail to perceive.[46] As a result, Morgan attempts to analyze how "the structure and operation of vision [is] a religious act" and how seeing itself is a "proactive gesture" that is deeply inflected by prior beliefs, values, and theological commitments.[47] Among other things, this means that a visual culture approach is as interested in *how* one sees—that is, the repeated procedures, learned routines, and social practices that condition historical acts of looking—as it is in *what* one sees.[48]

Thus construed, one of the central arguments that surfaces in Morgan's research is that the study of religious visual culture is best undertaken as an analysis of ways of seeing.[49] These ways of seeing might be considered as a specific type of visual practice, though I choose to treat these topics separately for several reasons. Seeing is certainly a practice that relies on visual

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of as "variant readings" of an image's message (a point which would need to be further debated), then scholars interested in religious visual culture might conceive of the reception history of an image's meaning as part of the *critical apparatus* of sight.

[45] Morgan, *The Embodied Eye*, 68. I made a similar point about the selective nature of seeing in my earlier discussion of cognitive research and the iconographic method (§4.4).

[46] Idem, *The Sacred Gaze*, 8. The same might also be said about how people come to see religiously meaningful things in dreams, apparitions, cloud formations, shadows, rock formations, etc. While a study of religious visual culture would include these types of phenomena, they generally lie outside the scope of my current project.

[47] Ibid., 6. However, one possible difficulty with this concept is that it is not always self evident how to determine what makes a particular instance of vision a *religious* act as opposed to a non-religious act. This determination might be particularly difficult when dealing with ancient images and their viewers. While this issue requires further explication, it will suffice for the purposes of this study to note that vision is not a neutral act and that seeing is influenced by and participates in the construction of religious beliefs and knowledge, even if the idea of religion is variously construed.

[48] In this sense, ways of seeing might be considered as a specific type of visual practice (see Morgan's comments in *The Sacred Gaze*, 2–3).

[49] Ibid., 6; See also idem, *The Embodied Eye*, 69 and *Visual Piety*, 1–3.

materials, but not necessarily in the same way as the practices enumerated in the functional typology described above (§6.2.1). Conversely, while almost all visual practices entail distinct ways of seeing, they also depend on other actions, routines, and/or responses. Though closely related, visual practices primarily address how people put images to use while ways of seeing focus on how people process visual data.

Throughout his work, Morgan develops a variety of different concepts that describe the ways in which believing comes to bear on seeing, including visual piety, image covenants, and the embodied eye.[50] However, Morgan most commonly frames his analysis of religious ways of seeing in terms of the "sacred gaze." According to Morgan, this term

> designates the particular configuration of ideas, attitudes, and customs that informs a religious act of seeing as it occurs within a given cultural and historical setting. A sacred gaze is the manner in which a way of seeing invests an image, a viewer, or an act of viewing with spiritual significance. . . . [T]he term signals that the entire visual field that constitutes seeing is the framework of analysis, not just the image itself.[51]

As is evident in this description, Morgan's notion of a "gaze" is not something that is simply a bit longer than a glance or glimpse. Neither is it as encompassing as what Martin Jay means by "scopic regime" or as enduring (and negative) as what most feminist critics mean by "the male gaze."[52] Rather, Morgan uses the notion of a gaze to refer to a particular viewing situation that "enables certain possibilities of meaning, certain forms of experience, and certain relations among participants."[53] A gaze offers a way of conceptualizing how certain conventions of seeing and specific religio-historical contexts condition visual experience not only by structuring the way in which people interpret visual data but also by "open[ing] up

[50] Morgan describes visual piety as "the visual formation and practice of religious belief" (*Visual Piety*, 1). An image covenant refers to "an agreement that sets out the conditions under which an image may deliver what the viewer expects from or seeks in it" (*The Sacred* Gaze, 105). The term embodied eye attempts to account for the way in which "seeing in one form or another is a practice that integrates two corporeal registers: the body of the individual and the body of the group" (*The Embodied Eye*, 14). Morgan uses many of these terms interchangeably, though in some cases it seems as if different terms have the potential to describe slightly different aspects of the religious apparatus of sight. For instance, visual piety seems to be the product or outcome of image covenants, which in turn reflect a powerful form of social embodiment.

[51] Idem, *The Sacred Gaze*, 3. As is evident from this description, there is much overlap between how Morgan understands the sacred gaze and what I am calling the religious apparatus of sight.

[52] For further discussion, see ibid., 3–4; and idem, *The Embodied Eye*, 67–70.

[53] Idem, *The Sacred Gaze*, 4.

the possibility of seeing what nonparticipants miss or fail to recognize."[54] In other words, visibility, not just visual interpretation, is (at least partly) the product of a gaze.[55]

Gazes are generated by a specific pattern of relationships between the viewer, an object, and the social, cultural, and religious contexts in which certain historical acts of seeing take place.[56] These elements can be variously configured and tend to exist in different forms not only throughout history and across cultures but also within the same religious community. As a result, Morgan is able to describe numerous types of gazes, including:[57]

(1) the *unilateral gaze*, which is the manipulative, objectifying, and asymmetrical gaze of the powerful over the powerless (as in Foucault's idea of panopticism or the Eye of Sauron in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*);

(2) the *occlusive gaze*, which is an attempt to render oneself invisible to, or protected from, the gaze of other people or other things, such as the evil eye or a look of shameful judgment;

(3) the *aversive gaze*, which is a deliberate act of *not* seeing, as when viewers, out of respect or fear, divert their eyes from an authority figure (casting one's eyes down before a king) or conceive of the deity as being formless, invisible, and/or utterly transcendent;

(4) the *reciprocal gaze*, which describes viewing situations where images seem to look back at their spectators, as with Christian icons of saints or with the previously discussed depictions of Ishtar in some Mesopotamian seals (cf. §4.3.1);

(5) the *devotional gaze*, which is a mode of visuality or bodily engagement in which a worshiper's mind becomes fully absorbed in prayer, meditation, and adoration through certain visualization techniques or the contemplation of a specific image;

(6) the *virtual gaze*, which generates a viewing situation in which the observer or actor can vicariously participate in past events (e.g., Passion plays, Nativity scenes) or can actively project herself into other spaces (e.g., grottos, "Holy Land" exhibits, re-creations of the Tabernacle);

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[54] Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 69.
[55] Ibid., 69.
[56] Ibid., 32; and idem, *The Embodied Eye*, 68.
[57] For further discussion of Morgan's "morphology of visual fields," see ibid., 70–83.

(7) the *communal gaze*, which involves envisioning the social body of belief through architecture, the physical arrangement of sanctuaries, or the public display of processions and rituals; and

(8) the *liminal gaze*, which constructs a viewing situation in which other people, places, and social realities are visualized as being chaotic, uncivilized, deviant, or anathema.

In each of these cases, the particular gaze or way of seeing that is in effect has the capacity to orient social relationships, inform a viewer's sense of identity or belonging in a community, and enable a worshiper to experience or sense the presence of the deity in or even beyond an image.[58] Thus, by analyzing the role and function of gazes in religious visual culture, Morgan brings into focus "the powerful and pervasive ways in which the devout see the world, organize and evaluate it, and infuse into the appearance of things the feelings and ideas that make the world intelligible and familiar to them."[59]

Morgan's understanding of these various gazes could be further elaborated, especially as they come to bear on the study of religious ways of seeing in Israelite religion. For the time being, however, I want to once again press a more practical point: What difference would it make to approach the relationship between seeing and believing in terms of the religious apparatus of sight? Is the sacred gaze useful as an analytical strategy when studying religious visual culture in ancient as well as modern contexts? Several possibilities should be noted.

First, by highlighting the fact that seeing is a constructive and religious activity, Morgan shifts greater attention to the role viewers play in receiving and processing visual data. Morgan regards the meaning of an image as a function of both its production *and* its reception, the intentions of the original producers *and* the interpretations of later viewers.[60] Though most art historians and biblical scholars would not dispute this point, traditional iconographic methods tend to give less attention to questions about the spectator and historical acts of seeing more broadly.[61] Instead, their efforts crystal around explaining why images look the way they do or what mes-

[58] Morgan, *The Embodied Eye*, 70.

[59] Idem, *The Sacred Gaze*, 260.

[60] Ibid., 30. By "later viewers" I mean those audiences who would have interacted with images in specific historical contexts after the image was originally created or commissioned. Though my interest lies primary with ancient audiences, contemporary scholars would likewise constitute a group of "later viewers."

[61] For instance, Mitchell claims that the "unfinished business" of Panofsky's iconographic method is its failure to account for the role of the spectator (*Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994]), 18. For further discussion see §5.4.

sage they were originally meant to convey, both of which are primarily questions about production.

Visual culture theorists recognize that the on-going meanings an image receives is generated through a complex interaction between the image, its viewers, and the social, cultural, and religious contexts in which subsequent acts of seeing take place.[62] In other words, knowledge about the production of an image does not rigidly predict how viewers process, interact with, or respond to visual materials. This does not imply that images are inherently ambiguous or that the meaning of a visual object is hopelessly indeterminate.[63] Rather, it simply raises the possibility that viewers of images, not unlike readers of texts, are capable of accepting, opposing, negotiating, or reimagining the original meaning or predominant interpretation of a given image based on the epistemological or moral lenses that condition their gaze.[64] One of the more practical outcomes of analyzing religious ways of seeing is that it acknowledges that "[v]iewers enter into a relation with the image in which they are expected to participate imaginatively, contributing what the image itself may not provide but must presuppose if it is to touch the viewer."[65] Thus, iconographic modes of analysis, even if they are nuanced in the ways I describe in chapter 4, cannot always account for what images come to mean in the eyes of certain viewing audiences.[66]

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[62] For a more general discussion of how visual culture theorists talk about the role of the viewer in the meaning-making process, see Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 45–71.

[63] In this sense, I disagree with the hermeneutical perspective of historian Margaret Miles (see §4.1). While Miles acknowledges that visual interpretation is conditioned by the social, cultural, and political contexts of certain viewing audiences, she at times seems to suggest that this leads to a type of interpretive nihilism when it comes to evaluating visual data: "The multivalence of an image means that we can never definitively interpret it" (*Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* [Boston: Beacon, 1985], 32). To a certain extent, Miles might be right—without training in the visual arts, historians often find images more difficult to read than texts. But Miles seems to overstate the case when she concludes that images do not yield a clearly defined "detachable conclusion" (ibid., 33). To be fair, Miles's larger point is that images can function as something other than a language of communication, and as such, they were not always or even primarily "read" in the context of Christian worship and devotional practices. On this point, I fully agree. However, even if one acknowledges that images express meaning in ways that are different than texts (§4.2) or that images are occasionally responded to as something other than just a medium for communicating information (§5.2), it does not necessarily follow that visual meaning is hopelessly indeterminate or ambiguous.

[64] Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 57.

[65] Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 75.

[66] Morgan sums up the issue in this way: "The study of visual culture will regard the image as part of a cultural system of production and reception, in which original intention does not eclipse the use to which images are put by those who are not their makers" (ibid., 30).

These concerns are especially evident in Morgan's study of popular religious imagery in *Visual Piety*. Throughout this work, Morgan examines how Warner Sallman's famous mid-twentieth-century depictions of Christ (**figs. 6.4–6**) have been interpreted as powerful symbols of American Protestant and Catholic religious faith. Among other things, Morgan explores the sometimes peculiar ways Sallman's images are *believed in*—that is, how they contribute to the social construction of reality and why they help make concrete the shared feelings, memories, beliefs, and values that define religious communities.[67]

In order to do so, Morgan solicited over 500 letters from devout viewers explaining how they view—or indeed, what they see in—Sallman's art. Two particular observations are instructive for the purposes of this discussion. First, despite the fact that Sallman's pale-skinned, light-haired Jesus hardly reflects what someone born in Palestine some 2000 years ago would have looked like, countless viewers attest that they "recognize" Jesus in these paintings. What they recognize, as Morgan points out, is not a realistic portraiture of Jesus but a spiritual essence behind the image, a vision of Jesus learned and cultivated through Sunday School education and popular American Christian visual culture. What results is a type of visual piety or devotional gaze that effectively "enhanc[es] the immanence of the spiritual referent through the image, reifying it, and merging it with a concept of the historical Jesus."[68] Through the eyes of faith, these paintings of Jesus become an icon of his spiritual presence despite the fact that they do not constitute a naturalistic portrait. Devout viewers see Jesus *in* or perhaps *beyond* these paintings because they reinforce what the viewers already have been trained to believe.[69] This is why the image seems so much like Jesus, and this is why so many viewers see Sallman's *Head of Christ* and cannot help but exclaim: "That's Jesus!"[70]

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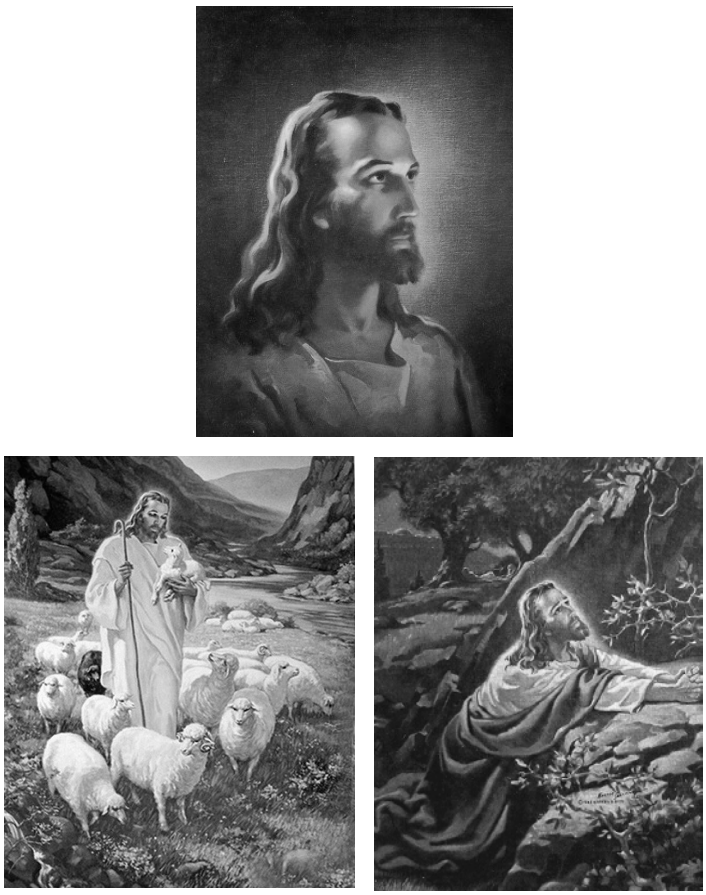
[67] Though beyond the scope of this discussion, another central argument that runs throughout Morgan's research is that material things, including images, contribute to the social, intellectual, and perceptual construction of reality. The work of several social thinkers are important to Morgan in this regard, including: Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966); Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (trans. Richard Nice; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Why We Need Things," in *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture* (ed. Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery; Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993). For further discussion, see Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 2–12.

[68] Ibid., 43. Though Morgan uses the term "the historical Jesus" I prefer "the real/actual Jesus" so as to avoid confusion with the term used in New Testament scholarship regarding reconstructions of the life of Jesus of Nazareth based on historical-critical methods.

[69] The same can be said of the popular religious paintings of Thomas Kinkade.

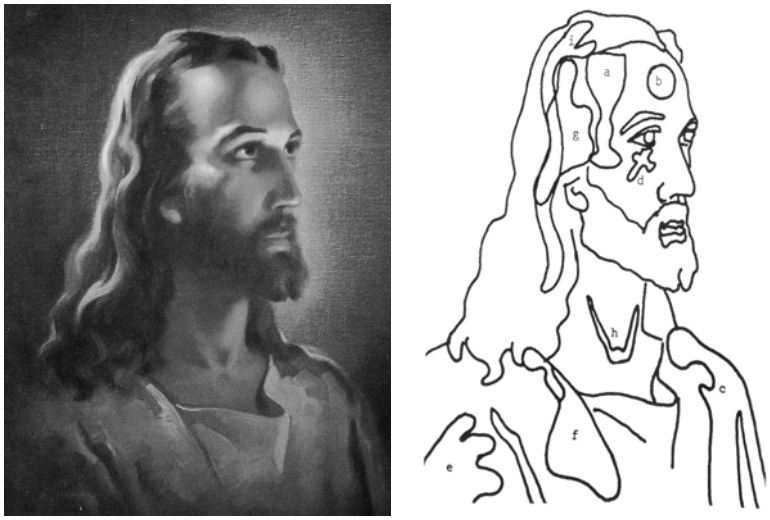
[70] Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 43, 122.



Figures 6.4–6. Paintings of Jesus by Warner Sallman. Top: *Head of Christ*, oil on canvas. © 1941, 1968 Warner Press, Inc., Anderson, Indiana. Bottom left: *The Lord is My Shepherd*, oil on canvas. © 1943, 1970 Warner Press, Inc., Anderson, Indiana. Bottom right: *Christ in Gethsemane*, oil on canvas. © 1942, 1969 Warner Press, Inc., Anderson, Indiana. Images used with permission.

But the sacred gaze does more than just shape how viewers interpret the subject matter of Sallman's paintings. It also conditions them to see things in the art that the author did not originally intend to depict. For instance, numerous viewers in Morgan's study indicate that they were able to discern religious symbols within Sallman's *Head of Christ*, as if this painting functioned as a "spiritual Rorschach blot" (**fig. 6.8**).[71] To reiterate an earlier point, these observations are not based on knowledge of iconographic con-

[71] Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 125.



Figures 6.7–8. Left: Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ* (Fig. 6.4 cropped). Right: Diagram of symbols identified by viewers: a) communion chalice; b) the Eucharist; c) a prophet or priest; d) a cross; e) three nuns in prayer; f) an angel in prayer; g) the Blessed Mother kneeling in prayer; h) a dove; and i) a serpent.[72] After Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 128 fig. 42. Image used with permission.

ventions nor even the artist's original intentions—indeed, in later interviews Sallman explicitly claimed *not* to have painted these symbols into the *Head of Christ*.[73] Rather, they are the product of the sacred gaze, a religious way of seeing that has led viewers "to textualize images, to treat them as the illustration of devotional or theological discourse."[74]

The result is that spiritually significant symbols emerge as a type of apparition on the surface of the artwork itself. Morgan's point is that not every viewer would see or recognize these images. In fact, the visibility of these symbols is contingent on prior beliefs, many of which seem to follow specific ecclesial affiliations. For instance, Catholic viewers reported seeing the shape on Jesus's left shoulder (labeled "c" in **fig. 6.8**) as a priest or

[72] These observations were made by twenty-two Catholic and Lutheran respondents who sent letters to Morgan about their responses to Sallman's *Head of Christ*. For further discussion, see Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 126–28.

[73] Sallman seems to have been influenced by the religious ways of seeing embodied in later viewers. When Sallman spoke about this painting in talks to Christian communities throughout America, he clarified that he did not *consciously* place these symbols into his art. Rather, he claimed that they appeared to him in the process of drawing (see ibid., 128–32). This is an interesting case of reverse reception history—that is, the religious ways of seeing of later viewers prompted the author to reassess his own understanding about the original production of the painting!

[74] Ibid., 140.

monk saying the *Confiteor* while Lutheran observers recognized in this same shape a prophet from the Hebrew Bible.[75] Though disagreeing on what these symbols represent, both Catholic and Lutheran viewers effectively insert the painting "into a mode of discourse built on the primary language of the Bible."[76] That is to say, what some religious viewers are able to see in the painting is conditioned by what they have come to believe as a result of certain theological traditions. In this way, religious ways of seeing corroborate prior biblical interpretation.[77]

The symbols enumerated in **fig. 6.8** would not likely be visible to viewers who lacked the theological knowledge needed to give these rather ambiguous shapes a spiritually significant meaning. It seems to me that a similar line of reasoning might also be applied to research pertaining to the search for Yahweh's image. As I discuss below (§6.4), there is little direct evidence on iconographic grounds that Israel had anthropomorphic images of Yahweh. However, when the situation is viewed from the vantage point of Morgan's work on religious ways of seeing, it remains possible that deeply held beliefs and expectations would have led at least some ancient Israelite viewers to look for and even "recognize" Yahweh in images that were not originally intended to represent their deity.

Second, Morgan's research tends to closely scrutinize the mechanisms that govern religious ways of seeing. In more recent work in art history, it is not uncommon for scholars to explore how issues related to class, race, gender, sexual orientation, political beliefs, and so forth condition a viewer's interpretation of an image. Morgan is interested in all of these factors as well. However, he moves one step further by arguing that codes of interpretation are based not only on a viewer's social location but also on "a tacit agreement, a compact or a covenant, that a viewer observes when viewing an image in order to be engaged by it, in order to believe what the image reveals or says or means or makes one feel—indeed, in order to believe there is something to believe, some legitimate claim to truth to be affirmed."[78] Image covenants, then, describe the epistemological and moral conditions that shape what viewers expect from an image.

Though Morgan's understanding of an image covenant does not precisely correspond to the biblical concept of covenant, both terms imply a certain type of relationship that is based on prior agreements and expectations. Thus, while image covenants do not rigidly determine how one interprets visual data, they do have, as Morgan puts it, a "portentous significance in determining what the image is seen to show."[79] In this way, image covenants provide a way of talking about visual response and experience that

[75] Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 131.
[76] Ibid., 140.
[77] Ibid., 140.
[78] Idem, *The Sacred Gaze*, 76.
[79] Ibid., 76.

acknowledges that seeing is a social (and, indeed, religious) act that operates according to trust, obeys certain agreed upon stipulations, and implies certain outcomes.

In the third chapter of *The Sacred Gaze*, Morgan identifies nine image covenants and divides them into two groups: one based on the particular mode of representation evident in the image and the other based on the religious context in which an image is encountered.[80] For instance, Morgan suggests that while a *mimetic covenant* assures viewers that what they see is a reliable and straightforward portrayal of the actual appearance of a person or object (as in a photograph or portrait), other covenants prompt the viewer to construe the relationship between image and referent in different ways: the *allegorical covenant* establishes that what one sees is a type of visual code that must be deciphered (as in a hieroglyph or emblem of a deity); the *exemplary covenant* encourages viewers to see an image as an ideal or formulaic representation of a subject (as in advertisements or fairy tales); the *expressivist covenant* assures viewers that the thing represented reflects the spirit or essence of the subject, not its natural form (as in impressionism); and the *deconstructive covenant* encourages a skeptical gaze that prompts the viewer to question the conventions of meaning-making or the relationship between image and text (as in M. C. Escher drawings or Magritte's previously discussed *La trahison des images*; cf. **fig. 3.7**).

In each of these cases, how a viewer understands an image depends on prior expectations about what (or how) that type of representation is designed to signify. A similar situation obtains with respect to a viewer's understanding of an image's relation to ecclesial authority and orthodox belief. For instance, while an *orthodox covenant* would assure viewers that what they see is ideologically correct and suitable for consumption, the *communal* and *authoritarian covenants* affirm, respectively, that what is seen reflects shared feelings and beliefs or bears the approval of an ecclesial authority. Finally, the *open covenant* invites creative acts of seeing and imaginative interpretations that are free from restraint. Here again, prior expectations condition how viewers come to interact with the meaning of an image in a religious context.

It might be said that each of these image covenants functions as an interpretive key or legend for how the viewer negotiates a range of potential meanings.[81] Just as understanding a legend is essential for reading a map, so too is understanding image covenants important for analyzing how religious ways of seeing condition visual interpretation. Not surprisingly, the mechanisms that govern ways of seeing can be quite complex. Multiple covenants can be at play at the same time, as when a mimetic covenant is reinforced with communal and orthodox covenants, as might be the case

[80] For further discussion, see Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 105–12.

[81] Ibid., 106–7.

when a viewer recognizes the actual Jesus in Sallman's paintings. Conversely, revoking one covenant and replacing it with another can generate starkly different interpretations of the same exact object.[82] My particular interest, however, is in how Morgan's idea of image covenants might shed new light on religious ways of seeing in ancient Israel. Specifically, in §6.4 I raise the possibility that the oft-debated search for Yahweh's image should not only involve careful archaeological and iconographic analysis but also critical reflection on how image covenants establish the epistemological and moral conditions under which a viewer comes to believe that a given image contains religiously meaningful information.

6.2.3. Assessment

By drawing on the work of David Morgan, I have briefly outlined two key dimensions of religious visual culture: the visual medium of belief and the religious apparatus of sight. The point of this survey is not to enter into an abstract discussion of theory but rather to develop an interpretive framework that can potentially reorient how biblical scholars approach the study of—among other things—Israelite aniconism and the search for Yahweh's image. Before turning to these two test cases, it will be important to pause in order to consider some of the potential challenges and objections that might arise when applying a visual culture approach to the study of ancient Israelite religion.

In certain respects, it could be argued that the field of iconographic exegesis *already* reflects a visual culture approach to the study of Israelite religion. Even though the genealogy of this field is almost exclusively traced through the Fribourg School, some of its orienting interests share a close family resemblance with the work of David Morgan, Margaret Miles, Colleen McDannell, and a host of other scholars who diverge from text-alone approaches to the study of religion.[83] To be sure, biblical scholars who em-

[82] Morgan puts it this way: "Renegotiating the prevailing covenant can be an activity of creative, critical, and even revolutionary significance in the history of visual production and reception" (*The Sacred Gaze*, 107).

[83] I do not mean to suggest that the Fribourg School played anything but a central role in the development of iconographic exegesis. However, the way in which scholars trace the intellectual lineage of a field contributes in no small way to their research agendas and methodologies. Though beyond the scope of this study, it would be a worthwhile project to retell the history of iconographic exegesis in a way that includes the Fribourg School but also more explicitly situates this field within a broader network of trends within the academic study of religion (for a partial exception, see Uehlinger, "Das Buch und die Bilder: 25 Jahre ikonographischer Forschung am Biblischen Institut der Universitāt Freiburg Schweiz – Dank an Othmar Keel," in *Images as Media: Sources for the Cultural History of the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean, 1st Millennium BCE* (OBO 175; Fribourg: University

ploy iconographic approaches clearly regard ancient art as a "compelling register" in which to examine Israelite religion. By showing how visual materials came to inform some of the figurative language found in the Hebrew Bible, these scholars have demonstrated, not unlike Morgan, that Israelite beliefs were mediated and mobilized by what people saw. And, in a very general sense, those utilizing iconographic exegesis would likely affirm that religious beliefs structure a certain way of seeing the world.

Nevertheless, I contend that the field of iconographic exegesis is still in a nascent and pioneering stage of exploring ancient Israelite visual culture.[84] As of yet, biblical scholars do not typically analyze the role of visual practices or the effect of religious ways of seeing when studying Israelite religion. Even if the study of religious visual culture and iconographic exegesis only differ in terms of their degree of interest in these topics, they nonetheless give rise to somewhat different interpretive perspectives and research agendas.

What might account for the apparent disconnect between these two fields? I suspect that this has something to do with the relative lack of interest in ancient art within visual culture studies (cf. §2.3.1), and conversely, the general reluctance to take up contemporary visual theory in biblical scholarship (cf. §1.1; §7.1). In addition, a visual culture approach to the study of religion faces a particular challenge when applied to ancient contexts. As noted earlier, biblical scholars do not have the same sort of access to Israelite viewers as Morgan does to contemporary American Christian communities.[85] In fact, evidence of ancient Israelite visual practices and ways of seeing can only be indirectly inferred from archaeological data, textual materials, and/or a broader understanding of the nature, role, and function of images in the ANE world. Therefore, investigations of ancient visual culture are bound to be somewhat speculative in nature, though I should be quick to add, not any more so than studies that focus on ancient *textual* materials.

The study of ancient visual culture is no more dependent on theory—or indeed, speculation—than more traditional research that is focused on source or redaction criticism. The best way forward in *any* study of Israelite religion is to construct working hypotheses that are based on multiple lines

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Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 399–408. I suspect that this historiographic account would prompt a broader range of research interests and a more diverse set of interpretive approaches.

[84] Though they rarely, if ever, cite Morgan or other visual culture theorists, some past contributions to iconographic exegesis have begun to explore what might be considered "visual culture" issues. As just one example, numerous contributors to Uehlinger's edited volume, *Images as Media*, have explored the social function of minor art in the ancient Near Eastern world.

[85] Morgan himself notes the difficulty of studying ancient visual culture ("Visual Religion," *Religion* 30 [2000]: 44).

of evidence and that take up careful reflection on hermeneutical assumptions. With this in mind, it remains possible—and in my estimation, potentially fruitful—to broaden the analytical scope of iconographic exegesis to include some of the persistent concerns that arise in the study of religious visual culture. Specifically, through two case studies I demonstrate how Morgan's above-mentioned concepts about visual practices and religious was of seeing might further advance two particularly important and vexing topics in the study of Israelite religion: the definition and extent of Israelite aniconism (§6.3) and the search for Yahweh's image (§6.4).

6.3. Israelite Aniconism: A Visual Culture Approach

In the last several decades, the study of Israelite aniconism has garnered considerable attention.[86] While a consensus has yet to emerge with regard

[86] For a representative list of some important contributions to the study of Israelite aniconism see: Robert P. Carroll, "The Aniconic God and the Cult of Images," *ST* 31 (1977): 51–64; William W. Hallo, *Cult Statue and Divine Image: A Preliminary Study* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1982); Jeffrey Tigay, *You Shall Have No Other Gods* (HSS 31; Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1986); Thorkild Jacobsen, "The Graven Image," in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (ed. Patrick D. Miller, Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 15–32; Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (trans. Naomi Goldblum; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Benjamin Sass, "The Pre-Exilic Hebrew Seals: Iconism vs. Aniconism," in *Studies in the Iconography of Northwest Semitic Inscribed Seals* (ed. Benjamin Sass and Christoph Uehlinger; OBO 125; Fribourg: University Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 194–256; Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in its Ancient Near Eastern Context* (ConBOT 42; repr. ed.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbraus, 2013 [1995]); Brian B. Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition: On Reading Images and Viewing Texts," in *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms* (ed. Diana V. Edelman; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 75–105; Christoph Uehlinger, "Israelite Aniconism in Context," *Biblica* 77 (1996): 540–49; Mettinger, "Israelite Aniconism: Developments and Origins," in *The Image and the Book*, 173–204; idem, "The Roots of Aniconism: An Israelite Phenomenon in Comparative Perspective," in *Congress Volume: Cambridge 1995* (ed. John A. Emerton; VTSup 66; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 219–234; Theodore J. Lewis, "Divine Images: Aniconism in Ancient Israel," *JAOS* 118 (1998): 36–53; Michael B. Dick, "Prophetic Parodies Against Making the Cult Image," in *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of the Cult Image* (ed. Michael B. Dick; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 1–53; Tallay Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol: Pictorial Representation of Deities in Mesopotamia and the Biblical Image Ban* (OBO 213; Fribourg: University Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005); Uehlinger, "Arad, Qiṭmīt—Judahite Aniconism vs. Edomite Iconic Cult? Questioning the Evidence," in *Text, Artifact, and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion* (ed. Gary Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis; BJS 346; Providence: Brown University Press, 2006), 80–112; Jill Middlemas, "Exclusively Yahweh: Aniconism and Anthropomorphism in Ezekiel," in *Prophecy and Prophets in* Ancient Israel: Proceedings from the Oxford Old Testament Seminar (ed. John Day; LHBOTS 531; New York:

to the interpretation of either the archaeological evidence or the complex literary development of the image ban texts in the Hebrew Bible, at least three trends are evident in recent research on this topic.

First, since the publication of Tryggve N. D. Mettinger's influential volume *No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in its Ancient Near Eastern Context* (1995), it has become increasingly common to approach the study of Israelite aniconism from a comparative perspective, especially with respect to West Semitic, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian religio-historical contexts. What is clear from this comparative approach is that while Israel's predilection for aniconic images of their deity—at least as expressed in the canonical texts—is certainly pronounced, it is not completely without precedent among other religious traditions in the ancient Near East.

Second, in recent years many biblical scholars have been interested in exploring how the image ban in Israelite religion developed over time. While the details of this historical development are debated, there is a general sense that Israelite aniconism progressed from a non-exclusive preference for aniconic representations of Yahweh in the pre-exilic period to more explicit strictures that demand an imageless cult in the exilic or post-exilic period (i.e., "programmatic aniconism"). Mettinger describes the former period as representing "*de facto* aniconism" and the latter as representing "programmatic aniconism."[87] Most of the legal texts in the Hebrew Bible that ban the production of cult images (Exod 20:3–6; 20:22–23; 34:17; Lev 19:4; 26:1; Deut 4:15–19; 5:8–10, etc.) seem to reflect programmatic aniconism and are judged by a majority of scholars to be rather late, at least as they appear in their current literary form.[88]

T&T Clark, 2010), 309–24; Mark K. George, "Israelite Aniconism and the Visualization of the Tabernacle," *Journal of Religion & Society Supplement* 8 (2012): 40–54. On the development of the image ban texts from an iconography-informed perspective, see Uehlinger, "Exodus, Stierbild und biblisches Kultbildverbot: Religionsgeschichtliche Voraussetzungen eines biblisch-theologischen Spezifikums," in *Freiheit und Recht: Festschritf für Frank Crüsemann zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. Christof Hardmeier, Rainer Kessler, and Andreas Ruwe; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2003), 42–77; and idem, "Prohibition of Images," in *Religion Past and Present: Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion* (ed. Hans Dieter Betz et al.; vol. 10; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 420–22.

[87] For a brief discussion of these terms, see Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 18. In Mettinger's view, *de facto* aniconism reflects a general preference for aniconic representations of Yahweh and thus would not have explicitly prohibited the use of iconic objects, such as anthropomorphic statuary. However, there is still considerable debate concerning the extent to which such objects were part of the early Yahwistic cult. For more on this latter issue, see Christoph Uehlinger's essay, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary in Iron Age Palestine and the Search for Yahweh's Cult Images," in *The Image and the Book*, 97–156. I will discuss this matter further in §6.4.

[88] Christoph Dohmen argues that none of the legal prohibitions against the worship of images in the Hebrew Bible can be dated prior to the fall of the Northern Kingdom. For further discussion, see Dohmen's *Das Bilderverbot: Seine Entstehung und seine Entwick-*

Third, an increasing number of scholars have sought to explain the emergence of aniconism in light of sociological and political motivations.[89] While these scholars do not dismiss the theological motivations behind the image ban, they recognize that this phenomenon is likely the product of numerous and complex factors.

My goal in this discussion is neither to rehash the details of these important avenues of research nor to offer a new hypothesis concerning the origins and development of Israel's aniconic tradition. Instead, I want explore how a visual culture approach in general, and a focus on visual practices in particular, might raise new questions and perspectives about the nature of Israel's aniconic tradition. For instance: To what extent do "aniconic" objects such as the cherubim throne, the ark, standing stones, or various divine symbols still constitute a visual medium of belief? Did Israelites utilize and respond to these so-called aniconic objects in ways that were fundamentally different than how other ANE worshipers treated anthropomorphic cult statuary? In what ways would evidence about ancient visual practices challenge how scholars characterize the differences between Israelite religion and that of its neighbors? In order to address these and related questions, I draw on visual culture theory as well as various lines of evidence concerning visual practices in the ancient world. The overarching goal of this investigation is to reframe how biblical scholars define aniconism (§6.3.1) and characterize the nature of Israelite worship (§6.3.2).

6.3.1. Definitions and Problems

Aniconism is not always consistently defined in studies of Israelite religion. In certain instances, this term is used in a general sense in order to refer to a culture or religion that lacks visual imagery completely. This definition takes aniconism in its broadest and most literal sense (i.e., αν = "without, wanting"; εικων = "of or relating to an image"). When applied to Israelite

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lung im alten Testament (2d ed.; BBB 62; Frankfurt am Mein: Athenäum, 1987 [1985]), esp. 236–77). However, the earliest date of these prohibitions is not easy to establish due in part to differing perspectives on the date of various sources within the Pentateuch. For a perspective different than Dohmen's, see Edward M. Curtis, "The Theological Basis for the Prohibition of Images in the Old Testament," *JETS* 28 (1985): 277–87.

[89] See, for instance, Ronald S. Hendel, "The Social Origins of the Aniconic Tradition in Early Israel," *CBQ* 50 (1988): 365–82; idem, "Aniconism and Anthropomorphism in Ancient Israel," in *The Image and the Book*, 205–28; Craig D. Evans, "Cult Images, Royal Policies and the Origins of Aniconism," in *The Pitcher is Broken: Memorial Essays for Gösta W. Ahlström* (ed. Steven W. Holloway and Lowell K. Handy; JSOTSup 190; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 192–212; and James M. Kennedy, "The Social Background of Early Israel's Rejection of Cultic Images," *BTB* 17 (1987): 138–44.

religion, this view suggests that the second commandment and other image ban texts not only prohibit the making of certain types of images of Yahweh but also effectively marginalize the artistic tradition of ancient Israel, and later, of Christianity and Islam.

This perspective is evident as early as the writings of the Roman historian Tacitus, who describes the uniqueness of Israelite faith in terms of their belief that Yahweh was incapable of being represented in visual or material form.[90] A similar view persisted in some academic circles well into the twentieth century. A telling example is related by history of religion scholar Erwin R. Goodenough. As a graduate student at Oxford in the 1920s, Goodenough set out to study early Jewish symbolism and its relationship to Hellenistic art.[91] However, when he brought this idea to his dissertation advisors, they reminded him that there was no such thing as Jewish art.[92] Several years later as a junior professor at Yale, Goodenough considered returning to the topic of Jewish symbolism but once again was dissuaded, this time by his senior colleagues who pointed out that any Jewish community that was loyal to Scripture would have had nothing to do with images.

However common this understanding of aniconism once was (or perhaps still is), is based on what art historian David Freedberg calls "a deep and persistent historiographic myth."[93] Freedberg's research demonstrates at a broad level that "the idea of a culture without material images runs counter to both experience and history."[94] As a result, Freedberg contends that an understanding of aniconism as the elimination of *all* visual imagery must be abandoned. Freedberg's comments cited in the epigraph to this chapter are particularly relevant to this point: "Even in cultures (such as Islam and Judaism) with prevailing interdicts against anthropomorphic representation, and an apparent emphasizing of word over image, of the written over the figured, the will to image figuratively—even anthropomorphically—cannot be suppressed."[95]

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[90] Tacitus remarks: "The Jews conceive of one god only, and that with the mind alone: they regard as impious those who make from perishable materials representations of gods in man's image; that supreme and eternal being is to them incapable of representation and without end. Therefore, they set up no statues in their cities, still less in their temples" (*Hist.* V, 5).

[91] For a fuller account of Erwin Goodenough's emerging interest in Jewish art and the obstacles he faced along the way, see vol. 1 of his *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (Bollingen Series 37; 13 vols.; New York: Pantheon, 1953), 1.3–32.

[92] As a result, Goodenough went on to write a more traditional text-based dissertation that focused on Hellenized Judaism. This research was eventually revised and published under the title *By Light, Light: The Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1935).

[93] Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 54.

[94] Ibid., 59.

[95] Ibid., 55.

A similar point can be argued about Israelite religion more specifically. As many archaeologists have shown, the material record of the Levant leaves little doubt that Israel's ban on images was far more limited in its scope and influence than traditionally thought. Not only did the ancient Israelites widely use the visual arts in various capacities but so too did early Jewish and Christian communities incorporate images into their homes, sanctuaries, and everyday practices. In fact, it was the discovery of an array of art objects at the Dura-Europos synagogue in the mid-1930s that ultimately compelled Goodenough to begin his extensive study of Jewish symbolism, which was later published in thirteen volumes under the title *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*.[96] In light of the evidence that Goodenough and other historians and archaeologists have put forth in the past century, it is now wholly untenable to conclude that Israel's aniconic tradition entailed a sweeping prohibition of the visual arts in general.

Most biblical scholars would not disagree with this conclusion. At the outset of *No Graven Image*, Mettinger stresses "the obvious fact that Israelite aniconism by no means excludes iconography."[97] Mettinger offers a definition of aniconism that attempts to delineate between acceptable and unacceptable ways of depicting the deity. Specifically, Mettinger claims that aniconism refers to a type of religion in which "*there is no iconic representation of the deity (anthropomorphic or theriomorphic) serving as the dominant or central cultic symbol, that is, where we are concerned with either (a) an aniconic symbol or (b) sacred emptiness.*"[98]

Generally speaking, this definition is consistent with the biblical image ban, which seems to have in mind a particular type of visual representation. For instance, the second commandment is not aimed against art in general but rather the making of an idol or cult image (פסל, Deut 5:8; cf. Exod 20:4).[99] This prohibition might have been expanded at a later point, as is

[96] See also Jacob Neusner's abridged edition of Goodenough's work, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (Bolligen Series; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

[97] Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 27.

[98] Ibid., 19; emphasis his.

[99] Michael B. Dick contends that an early form of Deut 5:8 only included the phrase לא תעשה לך פסל ("You shall not make for yourself an idol"). When the phrase כל תמונה ("form of anything") was later added, it was done so without a conjunctive waw, suggesting that כל תמונה was originally intended to modify פסל in some fashion. However, the version of this commandment found in Exod 20:4 adds a conjunctive waw (פסל וכל תמונה) thus creating two direct objects of the verb. This subtle changes affects how the third person plural pronouns found in the subsequent verse are understood (לא תשתחוה להם ולא תעבדם, Deut 5:9, Exod 20:5). In Exod 20:5, "you shall not bow down to *them* or worship *them*" may be understood to refer back to the פסל וכל תמונה in v. 4. In contrast, the third person plural pronouns found in Deut 5:9 do not likely refer back to the grammatically singular פסל כל תמונה but rather to the most proximate plural antecedent—the אלהים אחרים ("other gods") mentioned in v. 7. Since the version without the conjunctive waw seems to reflect a more difficult reading, most scholars agree that Deut 5:8 reflects an earlier literary form than Exod

perhaps evident in Deut 4:16–18, to include the making of "the representation of any statue" (תמונה כל סמל) as well as various types of "likeness" (תבנית). Similarly, while unadorned standing stones/pillars (מצבות) were once permitted in cultic contexts, they are later banned along with cult images in Deuteronomistic literature, perhaps because of their association with high places.

In either case, the Hebrew Bible does not seem to place a blanket prohibition on every form of representation, even when they are associated with the temple or the cult. In fact, Mettinger argues that two types of visual objects, which he calls "material aniconism" and "empty-space aniconism," were acceptable forms of representation throughout Israelite history. Thus, rather than reflecting a general aversion to figurative imagery, Israelite aniconism is best understood as a "strategy of replacement" in which certain visual depictions of the deity are prohibited and/or destroyed in favor of rival iconographies.[100] In this way, Israelite aniconism is as much about the *presence* of some types of images as it is about the *absence* of others.

While this understanding of Israelite aniconism is not uncommon in biblical scholarship,[101] what is relatively unique about Mettinger's approach is the way in which he uses Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory in order to differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable forms of representation.[102] As discussed earlier in this study (§4.2), Peirce distinguishes between three types of signs based on the referential relationship that exists between the signifier and that which is signified: *iconic* signs are similarity-based representations that naturalistically resemble their referent; *indexical* signs indicate their referent through causal associations or metonymic extensions; and *conventional* signs, whether visual or verbal, signify by means of a culturally conditioned code. Based on these three categories,

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20:3–4. For further discussion, see Dick, "Prophetic Parodies," 6–17. See also Robert Henry Pfeiffer, "The Polemic Against Idolatry in the Old Testament," *JBL* 43 (1924): 229–40; Dohmen, *Bilderverbot*, 154–80, 237–77; Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition," 78–96; and Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 5; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 205–7, 242–319.

[100] The idea of iconoclasm as a "strategy of replacement" comes from Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 117.

[101] See Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition," 77; Burkhard Gladigow, "Anikonische Kulte," in *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* (ed. Hubert Cancik, Burkhard Gladigow, and Matthias Samuel Laubscher; 5 vols.; Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1988), 1:472; Carroll, "The Aniconic God and the Cult of Images," 52; and (among others) Joseph Gutmann, "The 'Second Commandment' and the Image in Judaism," *HUCA* 32 (1961): 174.

[102] In his review of *No Graven Image*, Lewis suggests that one of the distinctive contributions of Mettinger's work is his "awareness of Peircean semiotics" ("Divine Images and Aniconism in Ancient Israel," 37–38). Halbertal and Margalit (*Idolatry*, 37–66) and Evans ("Origins of Aniconism," 194–95) also draw upon Peirce's theory of signs in their discussions of Israelite aniconism.

Mettinger clarifies that the only forms of representation that are prohibited in Israelite religion are iconic signs—that is, those images that aim to resemble, or copy, the deity's appearance in a naturalistic fashion, typically in anthropomorphic form. Conversely, representations of the deity that operate as either indexical or conventional signs are permitted.

The two types of aniconism that Mettinger identifies do not map neatly onto Peirce's categories. Though, in general, material forms of aniconism tend to signify through symbolic convention (as with Marduk's spade or the horned crown of ANE deities) while empty-space forms of aniconism are often indexical signs, which signify through metonymic extension or implication (as with the cherubim throne, the ark, and perhaps Jeroboam's bulls).[103] In either case, it is important to note that in Mettinger's definition, acceptable forms of representation in ancient Israel were *not* iconic in a Peircean sense. Mettinger consistently describes these signs as "aniconic," though in my view it is preferable to refer to them as "non-iconic" in order to underscore the fact that these types of images do not function by means of Peirce's notion of iconicity.[104]

However, this distinction raises an important question: Why, from a semiotic perspective, were iconic signs avoided or even explicitly banned in Israelite religion? While Mettinger only briefly treats this issue, Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit elaborate on two possibilities.[105]

First, they argue that strictures against similarity-based representations may have emerged from a fear that the signifier would come to displace that which it signifies in the context of worship.[106] By virtue of appearing lifelike, an iconic sign such as an anthropomorphic statue would be more apt to be seen as a manifestation of Yahweh's presence, not just his mediated representation. This view supposes a causal connection between an image's mimetic quality and its capacity to take on the power and status of its

[103] Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 21–22. However, if Jeroboam's bulls are understood not as pedestals *for* the deity but rather as symbolic representations *of* the deity, then they would be classified as a type of conventional sign, or in Mettinger's system, a form of "material aniconism." Likewise, the spade, which is commonly understood as a divine symbol for Marduk, might also be understood indexically insofar as this weapon is a metonymic extension of the deity. Mettinger tends to consider *maṣṣēbôt* as a form of material aniconism but he admits that they can operate as either conventional or indexical signs.

[104] The prevailing tendency in biblical scholarship is to use the term aniconic to refer to all signs that are *not* iconic. However, in some instances, scholars have used the term "anti-iconic" in place of aniconic. See, for instance, Gutmann, "The Image in Judaism," 174 and Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 154. Throughout this chapter, I primarily use "non-iconic" in a more technical sense to refer to visual signs that do not function by means of iconicity. In contrast, I reserve the term "aniconism" to refer to a type of religion that tends to prefer (or require) non-anthropomorphic and non-theriomorphic divine images.

[105] Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 37–66; see also Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 24–25.

[106] Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 40–41.

referent (cf. §5.2.1). In this perspective, the image ban is motivated by a desire to avoid a substitution error that blurs the ontological distinction between representation and reality.[107]

A second potential problem with similarity-based representations is that they can cause an error in one's conception of God.[108] It is often thought that the basis of this idea is rooted in the metaphysical claim that God has no image.[109] In this view, any representation of God would necessarily be a false image since God is inherently immaterial and invisible. However, the Hebrew Bible does not explicitly make this claim, and at least in a few instances it implies that Yahweh could indeed be seen.[110] Thus, Halbertal and Margalit instead argue that iconic signs can lead to an error in one's conception of God because they offer either an *incorrect representation* of the deity (i.e., while God is visible, no human has seen God and thus they cannot know how to truly represent the divine form) or an *inappropriate representation* of the deity (i.e., they threaten to diminish God's transcendence and uniqueness by making God's image widely available).[111]

In contrast, non-iconic representations signify by means of more indirect and conventional associations between signifier and signified, thus making it less likely that they would cause an error of substitution or an error in one's understanding of the deity.[112] As a result, while God's image can be implied through metonymic extension and even described with anthropomorphic language, it cannot be depicted by a similarity-based image.

On the whole, Mettinger and Halbertal and Margalit have shown how Peirce's theory of signs can help provide a more precise understanding of certain aspects of Israelite aniconism. On this score I agree with Theodore

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[107] Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 42. This fear of substitution informs much of the discourse in iconoclastic controversies throughout Jewish and Christian history. A similar logic might also be evident in the Decalogue, where the prohibitions against making cult images and worshiping other gods are closely linked.

[108] Ibid., 45–46.

[109] Ibid., 45.

[110] For instance, Num 12:8 claims that Moses "beholds the form of the LORD" and similarly the elders of Israel are said to have "beheld God" in Exod 24:11. Isaiah has a vision of the LORD in the temple (Isa 6:1) and Ezekiel describes the appearance of God as "something that seemed like a human form" (Ezek 1:26). However, Deut 4:15–16 might give some credence to the idea that the prohibitions against making images of Yahweh are rooted in the fact that the deity has no form: "Since you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourself closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any figure . . . ". Yet even here it is unclear whether the point of v. 15 is to assert that Yahweh has no form or rather that the Israelites did not see Yahweh's form on this particular occasion (ibid., 46).

[111] Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 47.

[112] It should be noted, however, that Halbertal and Margalit recognize that substitution errors are not impossible with non-iconic signs (ibid., 48). This possibility will be discussed in more detail below (§6.3.2).

J. Lewis who, in his review of Mettinger's *No Graven Image*, contends that a greater awareness of Peircean semiotics, which is "all too rare among philologically oriented [biblical] scholars," could help advance the study of Israelite aniconism.[113]

However, when evaluated from a visual culture perspective, this semiotic understanding faces a number of problems. On the one hand, even though Mettinger and Halbertal and Margalit classify anthropomorphic and theriomorphic divine images as iconic signs, it remains unclear how or even if these forms of representation can actually be said to "resemble" a deity in any mimetic or naturalistic fashion.[114] The problem, of course, is that deities don't tend to sit for portraits. Without having access to what the gods *really* looked like, it would be difficult to assess the level of correspondence that exists between the image and its referent. To be sure, worshipers *imagined* their deities in human terms, and so one might conclude that a certain anthropomorphic form resembles the "mental iconography" an artist or viewer associates with that god. But this is not exactly the type of referential relationship that Peirce has in mind when he talks about iconicity. Or if it were, one would need to greatly expand what is included in Peirce's category of iconic signs since ancient viewers seem to have imagined their deities in non-anthropomorphic and non-theriomorphic forms as well.[115]

Furthermore, Peirce's understanding of similarity-based representation does not do justice to native ANE understandings of the relationship between images and their referents, whether gods or otherwise.[116] For one thing, in contrast to Peirce's theory, perceptual and conceptual art (i.e., icons and symbols) are not clearly delineated categories in ancient art. Rather, they seem to reflect polarities along a continuum of representational strategies. In addition, what counts as mimetic correspondence is culturally

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[113] Lewis, "Divine Images and Aniconism in Ancient Israel," 37–38.

[114] Early in their study, Halbertal and Margalit partially acknowledge this problem when they note the fact that Nelson Goodman rejects the possibility of a purely iconic sign that is free of convention. Yet, for the purposes of their study, Halbertal and Margalit maintain Peirce's threefold division of signs (*Idolatry*, 39).

[115] Mettinger himself makes some overtures in this direction, but he never directly addresses this matter. See, for instance, *No Graven Image*, 20 and 38, esp. n. 114.

[116] Mettinger raises the question about whether a Peircean distinction between iconic and aniconic signs would apply to ANE visual materials. Mettinger affirms that "such a distinction seems to be made by the Israelites when the prohibition of images was formulated" (*No Graven Image*, 20). However, Mettinger does not elaborate on this point. Even if one understands the Hebrew term תמונה in the second commandment of the Decalogue as referring to appearance or external shape (see Silvia Schroer, *In Israel gab es Bilder: Nachrichten von darstellender Kunst im Alten Testament* [OBO 74; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987], 335), it does not necessarily follow that a תמונה connotes a Peircean understanding of iconicity.

and historically conditioned, and, as a result, western notions of mimesis do not easily map onto modes of signification in ANE art, including the depiction of deities.[117]

To illustrate this point, most of the divine images that Mettinger would classify as iconic signs do not seem to have been intended by ANE artists to capture the physical appearance of a deity. In fact, at least some ANE divine images cannot easily be differentiated based on how the deity's bodily traits or facial features are depicted, as is the case with the three gods pictured in **figs. 6.9–11**. What often distinguishes one deity from another—or indeed, a god from a human—is the presence of certain symbols, such as an emblem, a weapon, a type of garment, an attribute animal, or a particular type of pedestal. As a result, rather than functioning as an iconic portrait of the deity, it is perhaps better to understand anthropomorphic images as a type of divine determinative that signifies by means of convention rather than resemblance.[118]

Equally problematic is the fact that ancient Near Eastern practices allowed for a certain degree of fluidity in divine embodiment. In his recent volume, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, Benjamin D. Sommer argues that in the ANE religious imagination a particular god could manifest himself in a multiplicity of bodies or forms.[119] For instance, a single god could be simultaneously incarnate in non-identical cult statues at different geographical locations. In a similar way, a god could also be thought to inhabit multiple "aniconic" objects, such as a pillar or stone.[120] What is clear in Sommer's research is that ANE image theology allowed for "multiplicity in unity" when it comes to the divine body.[121] In my estimation, Sommer's notion about the fluidity of divine embodiment is not easily accounted for by Peircean semiotics.

A similar idea is evident in how Mettinger attempts to deal with fluidity in Egyptian art. Erik Hornung has shown that Egyptian artists could depict the same god in various different forms side-by-side with one another. In an artifact from the Louvre, the goddess Hathor is represented by four types

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[117] Zainab Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation In Babylonia and Assyria* (Archaeology, Culture, and Society. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2003), 87–89.

[118] See Keel's comments about royal images in "Iconography and the Bible," *ABD* 3:360. Henri Frankfort makes a similar point about Egyptian divine images in *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (Harper Torchbooks: The Cloister Library; New York: Harper, 1961 [1948]), 12.

[119] Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[120] The converse is also possible: divine identities can overlap and couple together, making it possible that a single name (such as Baal/Hadad/Haddu) could refer to multiple deities.

[121] Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 16.

Figures 6.9–11. Left: Stamp seal of Sîn in crescent above stylized tree, 7th c. B.C.E. After Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 243 fig. 76; cf. Delaporte, *Catalogue des cylindres orientaux*, no. 538. Center: Stele of storm god on a bull, Arslan-Tash, 8th c. B.C.E. After Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 249 fig. 91; cf. Black and Green, *Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, fig. 89. Right: Stele of Ishtar of Arbela on lion, Til Barsip, 8th c. B.C.E. After Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 249 fig. 90; cf. Ornan, "Ištar as Depicted on Finds from Israel," fig. 9.10.

of figures: a woman, a cow, a serpent, and a lion-headed female.[122] In discussing this example, Mettinger acknowledges that these individual representations of Hathor only partially qualify as iconic signs since each merely "hints at essential features of [Hathor's] character and function."[123] As a result, Mettinger concludes that one should "allow for the possibility that an anthropomorphic or theriomorphic idol sometimes expresses some essential *aspect* of the deity in question so that we are only allowed to speak of a *degree* of resemblance or motivation."[124] Perhaps so. But even if Hathor was thought to have multiple physical forms, it is still doubtful if these representations of her "essential features" are best described in terms of Peirce's understanding of iconicity. Or at the very least, if ancient viewers thought each of these images of Hathor simultaneously resembled the god-

[122] Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt* (trans. John Baines; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982), 113. As Philippe Derchain points out, Hathor is sometimes depicted with multiple faces (*Hathor Quadrifrons: Recherches sur la Syntaxe d'un Mythe Égptien* [Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut in het Nabije Oosten, 1972], Pls. 1–2).

[123] Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 22.

[124] Ibid., 22; emphasis his.

dess, it was likely because they operated with a very different understanding of iconicity than Peirce.

A final problem with Mettinger's definition of aniconism is that he reserves the term "image" exclusively for iconic signs.[125] Objects such as the cherubim throne, Jeroboam's bulls, and a wide variety of divine emblems would not qualify as images in Mettinger's perspective since they signify by means of an indexical or conventional relationship with their referents. Perhaps little should be made of Mettinger's terminological decisions—indeed, it is often advisable not to split hairs about the usage of a word as slippery as "image." However, his insistence that only iconic signs are images is somewhat curious since Mesopotamian literature uses the term *salmu* to refer to anthropomorphic cult statues as well as non-iconic stelae.[126]

From a visual culture perspective, what is even more problematic about Mettinger's rather narrow definition of an image is the fact that it seems to display one of the symptoms of the historiographic myth of aniconism. Specifically, Freedberg points out that when confronted with the fact that supposedly aniconic cultures do in fact have images, scholars often go to great lengths to deny the power and relevance of those images.[127] This is often accomplished by dismissing certain images as being "merely decorative" or failing to acknowledge the way in which they exhibit figurative, or even anthropomorphic, characteristics. Thus, in an effort to sustain the myth that some cultures and religions are essentially imageless, certain forms of visual representation are reclassified in a way that makes it clear that they should not be regarded as images in the first place.

A similar tendency might be at work for Mettinger. He sets apart non-iconic representations of the deity as a type of pseudo-image, a visual form that is thought to be fundamentally different from anthropomorphic cult statuary. In this way, Mettinger is able to maintain that Israelite worship was, strictly speaking, imageless despite the fact that a variety of visual objects, albeit non-iconic in nature, were used in connection with the temple and cult. My point is not that Mettinger's use of semiotic theory is misguided or that iconic and non-iconic signs operate in the same way. Rather, I simply mean to suggest that how one defines terms such as "image" and "aniconism" can, whether intentionally or unintentionally, perpetuate the mistaken notion that Israelite religion was a rather artless or visionless affair.

I want to press this matter further by suggesting that semiotic distinctions between iconic and non-iconic representations are somewhat beside the point when it comes to evaluating Israelite religion from a visual culture perspective. Despite the fact that the Hebrew Bible prohibits the production

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[125] Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 22, 27.

[126] Stephanie Dalley, "The God Salmu and the Winged Disc," *Iraq* 48 (1986): 88.

[127] Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 59–60.

of certain types of divine images, Israelite religion clearly relied upon what Morgan would call a visual medium of belief. Entering the temple would have been a visually stimulating experience and the everyday function of the cult would have been inextricably bound to a host of material objects. Even though some parts of the temple were restricted, great care is taken to describe—or visualize—its appearance. The temple was said to be adorned with ornate columns, latticework, precious metals, floral designs, and animal figures (1 Kgs 6:14– 36). The cherubim throne, an ark, a golden menorah, an altar, the table for the bread of Presence, basins, bowls, and various other instruments could be found within the walls of the sanctuary (1 Kgs 7:13–51). Furthermore, the priests wore elaborately embroidered garments (Exod 28:1–43) and the prophets describe spectacular visions of the deity (Isa 6:1–5; Ezek 1:4–28). Even the most programmatic stages of aniconism in Israelite history did not completely reduce religion to the realm of words and creeds. Many aspects of Israelite religion continued to be experienced with the eyes and absorbed through the senses even long after the image ban was firmly in place.

In light of these observations, I contend that a visual culture approach to the study of Israelite aniconism would prompt biblical scholars to define the image ban in a narrower sense—that is, as a restriction on certain types of images, not artistic representation more broadly. In addition, a visual culture approach would also clarify that a so-called aniconic cult was still "largely unintelligible outside its incarnation in material expressions."[128] In other words, matter—and I should add, seeing—still mattered greatly to Israelite religion even after more programmatic forms of the image ban had emerged. In making this claim, I want to underscore the fact that iconographic and semiotic considerations do not tell the whole story about the nature of Israelite worship. As I discuss in the next section, information gleaned from visual practices is equally important.

6.3.2. Rethinking the Nature of Israelite Worship

While questions about visual practices are critical to the study of religious visual culture, they have not often played a central role in discussions about Israelite aniconism. As is evident in Mettinger's definition of aniconism, a religion is deemed to be aniconic or iconic based exclusively on what its images look like or how those images signify. While this approach is not without merit, I suspect that a scholar such as David Morgan would counter by noting that what makes a religion iconic or aniconic has just as much to do with how its worshipers utilize, rely on, and respond to a wide variety of objects as a visual medium of belief. In other words, when seen from the

[128] Arweck and Keenan, *Materializing Religion*, 2–3.

vantage point of visual culture theory, the study of Israelite aniconism should entail a close analysis of the ways in which all sorts of images, including non-iconic ones, were put to use. In the following discussion, I briefly develop two arguments concerning ancient visual practices, noting in each case how they relate to the main ideas behind Morgan's functional typology of religious imagery.

6.3.2.1. The Correlation of Art and Practice

In some studies of Israelite aniconism, an absence of iconic images of the deity in certain media is taken as general proof that Israelites did not relate to their deity in visual form. This methodological assumption underlies some of the central conclusions that Keel and Uehlinger draw about Israelite religion in *GGG*. As mentioned earlier (§2.1), Keel and Uehlinger regard minor art as an invaluable source in religio-historical research since it provides a record of artistic preferences across different time periods and regions.[129] Because of this, the information gleaned from glyptic materials often can provide vital information about the nature and development of Israelite religion, including its aniconic tradition.

Seen from this perspective, one of the most important observations made in *GGG* is that beginning in Iron Age IIA there is a general recession of anthropomorphic divine images on Syro-Palestinian seals and amulets.[130] In place of this type of iconography, attribute animals and various symbols are increasingly used to represent deities. Since Keel and Uehlinger suppose that the nature of Israel's cultic practices directly correlates with trends in its iconographic repertoire, they infer from this data that pre-exilic worship in Israel and Judah made little use of iconic objects for their deity.

This conclusion is certainly not without warrant. In almost every respect, *GGG* should be praised for its detailed analysis of glyptic art as well as its use of pictorial materials in religio-historical research. However, in this particular case, the findings of *GGG* are in need of further refinement as Uehlinger himself argues in a later study.[131] In his contribution to the volume *The Image and the Book*, Uehlinger suggests that some of the conclusions arrived at in *GGG* were unduly influenced by the nature of its source materials. Without diminishing the importance of glyptic materials, Uehlinger wonders if they are always the most pertinent source when it comes to understanding developments in the cultic sphere.[132] In particular, Uehlinger recognizes that "the worship of certain deities, anthropomorphically

[129] Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 10–11.
[130] See ibid., 133–75.
[131] Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," in *The Image and the Book*, 97–155
[132] Ibid., 102.

or not, does not necessarily leave a trace in seal iconography."[133] Conversely, a change in preferences in glyptic iconography need not indicate concomitant trends in cultic practices "unless similar changes are observed in other media and/or [are] confirmed by the archaeological record."[134] As a result, in his contribution to *The Image and the Book*, Uehlinger evaluates archaeological evidence that does *not* play a central role in *GGG*, such as metal and stone statuary, terracotta and pillar figurines, cult stands, and shrine models.[135]

On the whole, this evidence supports the notion that anthropomorphic cult statuary and other related paraphernalia continued to be produced and used in Syria-Palestine long after the end of the Late Bronze Age. Admittedly, the archaeological record does not give us decisive proof that even these materials were incorporated into the worship of pre-exilic Israel or Judah. However, since objects such as statuary, figures, cult stands, and so forth were far more likely to be associated with cultic contexts than glyptic materials, Uehlinger cautions against using trends in seal iconography to draw general conclusions about the prominence of aniconism in Israelite worship. In fact, Uehlinger proposes that *despite* the trends in seal iconography, "during Iron Age II major cults and temples attached to royal sponsorship were centred upon iconic statuary and that the latter was generally anthropomorphic."[136] Uehlinger does not overlook the fact that at least some aniconic practices, such as the worship of standing stones, are also attested during this same time period.[137] Nevertheless, Uehlinger stresses that evidence of aniconic objects should be understood as indicating one of many forms of worship in Iron Age Syria-Palestine, not as general proof that Israelite religion was essentially or exclusively aniconic prior to the exile.[138]

Not everyone would agree with Uehlinger's conclusions about the nature of pre-exilic worship in Israel and Judah. However, on methodological grounds, Uehlinger is not alone in questioning whether a culture's iconographic preferences directly correlate with its cultic practices, or for that matter, its cognitive perceptions of the deity. Archaeologist Tallay Ornan arrives at a similar conclusion in her study of divine imagery in ancient Mesopotamia. In *The Triumph of the Symbol*, Ornan offers a diachronic survey of trends in Mesopotamian art during the Late Bronze and Iron Ages (ca. 1500–500 B.C.E.). Ornan notes that worshipers throughout the ancient Near Eastern world routinely talked about and imagined their deities in human form, as is evident in the fact that anthropomorphisms abound in

[133] Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 102 n. 27.
[134] Ibid., 102 n. 27.
[135] For an overview of these materials, see ibid., 102–39.
[136] Ibid., 139.
[137] Ibid., 139.
[138] Ibid., 140.

Mesopotamian literary and pictorial sources from a very early point. Based on this data, many scholars conclude that Babylonian and Assyrian religions were primarily iconic in nature.

However, Ornan's analysis suggests a more complicated picture. As early as the end of the fourth millennium, non-anthropomorphic divine images are also evident in Mesopotamian iconography, suggesting that iconic art was not the only acceptable way of depicting divine figures. In fact, during the last half of the second millennium and continuing throughout the first half of the first millennium, there was a decisive shift away from representing deities in anthropomorphic forms in cylinder and stamp seals, palace wall decorations, rock reliefs, stelae, and *kudurrus*.[139] Instead, it became increasingly common to signify deities through non-iconic symbols such as emblems, weapons, attribute animals, composite creatures, and so forth. Thus, throughout the Iron Age, non-iconic representations had come to (mostly) replace iconic ones as the preferred way of depicting the deity in virtually every form of Mesopotamian art. While this preference for divine symbols never developed into a programmatic law in ancient Mesopotamia, it was still the case that non-iconic depictions of the deity played a substantial role in ancient Mesopotamian religions.

Like Uehlinger, Ornan recognizes some degree of slippage between art, practice, and perception in ancient Mesopotamian religion. During the time period in which non-anthropomorphic divine symbols were prevalent in Mesopotamian art, anthropomorphic cult statuary continued to be used in temple contexts, and, furthermore, anthropomorphic descriptions of the deity were still regularly deployed in literary sources. In other words, even though there was a clear preference for non-iconic depictions of the deity in certain periods of ancient Mesopotamian art, Assyro-Babylonian religions nevertheless utilized so-called iconic objects (e.g., anthropomorphic statuary) in cultic practices and conceptualized their deity in human-like terms.[140]

A similar discrepancy between artistic preferences on the one hand and cultic practices and mental perceptions on the other hand obtains in other ANE contexts. As Mettinger has shown in *No Graven Image*, various West Semitic cultures maintained anthropomorphic images of the deity in the temple even as they concurrently used symbols, standing stones, and other

[139] There are, however, some notable exceptions. During the reign of Sennacherib, images of anthropomorphic deities can be found on various rock reliefs, stelae, and other artifacts. The general resurgence of anthropomorphic divine images during this time period was likely motivated by numerous factors, including the influence of Syrian iconography, which is known to favor humanlike depictions of its gods. For further discussion, see Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 75–86.

[140] Ibid., 176.

non-iconic objects outside the shrine.[141] Furthermore, anthropomorphic metaphors and similes for the deities continued to be widely utilized in literary texts. Though space prohibits an extensive review of this data, it will suffice to note that in both East and West Semitic contexts, a preference for non-anthropomorphic divine images did not necessarily imply that worship practices or mental perceptions were exclusively—or even primarily—focused on non-iconic depictions of the deity.

Unfortunately, Mesopotamian texts provide very little insight into this phenomenon and, as a result, scholars are left to speculate as to its underlying motivations and rationale. For instance, Wilfred Lambert has suggested that divine symbols might have been favored because they could more clearly indicate the difference between human and divine subjects or because emblems were simply easier to render than human forms.[142] However, as Ornan points out, both of these suggestions are insufficient.[143]

Instead, it is more likely the case that the reluctance to render the deity in anthropomorphic forms outside the temple was the result of complex political, religious, and social factors. For instance, the exclusion of anthropomorphic depictions of the deity from palace decorations, rock reliefs, and stelae might reflect a concerted effort to elevate the status of the king as the chief protagonist in Assyrian royal ideology.[144] Alternatively, the deity's anthropomorphic form may have come to be seen as an especially sacred manifestation of the god that was exclusively tied to its abode in the temple.[145] When the image of the deity needed to be rendered outside the context of the shrine, it had to be translated into a type of "visual metaphor" that was less sacred, and thus presumably more appropriate, for public consumption.[146]

A similar argument about controlling access to the human form of the deity could be made in terms of visual and textual literacies. Since the ability to read cuneiform was surely a minority phenomenon in ancient Mesopotamia, written anthropomorphic descriptions of the deities were essen-

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[141] Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 28–32, 79–113, 115–34. See also Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 112–13; and idem, "The Goddess Gula and Her Dog," *Israel Museum Studies in Archaeology* 3 (2004): 13–30.

[142] Wilfred George Lambert, "Ancient Mesopotamian Gods: Superstition, Philosophy, Theology," *RHR* 207 (1990): 123–24.

[143] Specifically, if symbols helped artists and viewers to differentiate between gods and humans, it is unclear why symbolic representations would have been favored only in certain periods. In addition, the fact that human worshipers and royal figures were often depicted on the same artifacts as divine symbols makes it difficult to conclude that ease of execution was the driving force behind the proliferation of non-iconic representations of the deity. See Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 173–74.

[144] Ibid., 172–73.

[145] Ibid., 174.

[146] Ibid., 178.

tially reserved for the privileged few while the general populace was left to experience the deity through symbolic representations in the visual arts.

In either case, my point in drawing attention to these general observations is to suggest that from a visual culture perspective, few (if any) ANE religions were consistently aniconic in terms of their artistic preferences, worship practices, and mental perceptions of the deity. In each case, genuine religious experience, as McDannell so aptly puts it, was "expressed and made real" in and through visual media.[147]

Something similar might also be said about Israelite religion. The Bible, of course, is replete with anthropomorphic language about God.[148] And as Uehlinger has shown, numerous anthropomorphic objects seem to have been used in connection with the cult throughout the pre-exilic period, if not later. This latter argument is strengthened even further if, as Uehlinger contends, worship at the Ḥorvat Qiṭmīt sanctuary in the northern Negev, which was centered on cult statues, was not exclusively Edomite but rather fell within the administrative reach of Judah.[149] Thus, even as the Israelites generally abstained from and eventually prohibited the anthropomorphic depiction of Yahweh in the visual arts, they continued to think of their deity in human terms and to negotiate their religious experience of the divine through material objects.[150]

Ornan suggests that the eventual reluctance to produce anthropomorphic divine images in ancient Israel was not solely the result of internal theological developments. Rather, the prohibition on iconic depictions of Yahweh "is to be perceived as a world view basically inspired by contemporary tendencies in Babylonia and Assyria, and not, as commonly suggested, as one that opposes Mesopotamian perceptions."[151] However, an important difference arises during the time of the exile. Since anthropomorphic depictions of the deity were only permitted within the context of the deity's earthly abode, the loss of the Jerusalem temple led to an intensification of the non-iconic tendencies in Syro-Palestinian art. Without a shrine for their deity, the Judahite deportees "turned the pictorial cultic reality surrounding them—the non-written Babylonian custom—into a clearly articulated rigid written law, prohibiting the presentation of God."[152] In this view, the development of programmatic aniconism was one of necessity, at least initially.

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[147] McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 272

[148] God is often described as having human features, including a face, hands, feet, and back (cf. Gen 33:10; Exod 24:9–11, 33:20–23; Num 12:8; 1 Sam 7:13; Ps 75:8; etc.) and in Gen 1:26–27 humanity is said to be made in the image of God. Even in the prophetic idol parodies what seems to be at issue is the incomparability of God's form, not the fact that God had no form (cf. Isa 40:18, 25; 46:4).

[149] Uehlinger, "Judahite Aniconism vs. Iconic Cult," 80–112.

[150] Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 178.

[151] Ibid., 182.

[152] Ibid., 182.

Only later when the exiles returned to Judah and encountered more traditional forms of iconic cult practices did it become theologically and politically expedient to implement a sharper and more sweeping critique of divine imagery in both art *and* practice.[153] It was likely in this context that new concepts of divine presence, such as the Priestly *kābôd* and Deuteronomistic *šēm* theologies, developed in order to compensate for what was a new and more extreme version of aniconism. In either case, it is important to note that iconic conceptions of God were not rejected until much later. In fact, what might be called "mental aniconism"—that is, the explicit refusal to conceptualize or imagine the deity in human-like form—is first evident in tenth-century C.E. Jewish thinkers such as Sa'adyā Gaon (al-Fayyūmī) and only became prominent in Christian circles through the iconoclastic theologies of some still later Protestant reformers.[154]

In sum, there seems to be clear evidence from the ancient world that iconographic preferences do not directly correlate with the nature of worship practices, let alone mental perceptions about the deity. These findings are consistent with Morgan's previously discussed functional typology of image use, which establishes that what makes an image religious—and I should add, what makes a religion iconic—is not only the presence of certain types of images but rather how visual materials are put to use in cultic settings and everyday religious experiences. I suspect that most biblical scholars would not disagree with this point in principle, though to my knowledge very few have explicitly incorporated this type of visual culture perspective into their research on Israelite aniconism. Doing so would reframe how scholars study ancient religions in general and Israelite religion in particular in at least two ways.

First, this perspective would complicate the criteria scholars use to decide if a given religion is aniconic or iconic in the first place—indeed, it would even question if any religion is aniconic or iconic as such. In my estimation, the nature of worship practices in the ancient (or modern) world should be characterized with respect to two intersecting coordinates: one which describes their iconographic preferences with respect to the deity and the other which accounts for the extent to which they incorporate iconic images (or visual materials in general) into their worship practices.[155] This approach would enable scholars to characterize ancient religions with more nuance. For instance, pre-exilic Israelite religion might best be described as exhibiting a visual medium of belief that was aniconic with respect to artistic representations of Yahweh in certain media (though see §6.4 for further

[153] Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 155.

[154] Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 180.

[155] One might also include a third coordinate that accounts for how a given religion talks about and describes deities in theological texts. However, since all ANE religions seem to use anthropomorphic language in reference to its gods, the first two coordinates seem to be most relevant for my purposes here.

qualification) but was otherwise functionally and conceptually iconic.[156] By explicitly characterizing Israelite religion in these terms, biblical scholars would be able to offer a mediating position between the perspective offered in *GGG* and the perspective offered in Uehlinger's contribution to *The Image and the Book*.

Second, the perspective mentioned above would allow for a clearer description of the diachronic changes that occur in ANE religions. For instance, the primary difference between Assyro-Babylonian religions from the beginning of the second millennium to the beginning of the first millennium lies not so much in their cultic practices or mental perceptions about the gods, but rather the way in which they preferred to represent their deities in visual form. Conversely, the difference between pre-exilic and post-exilic Israelite religion—or perhaps even the religion of the exiles and those who remained in the land—had more to do with changes in their cultic context (i.e., the loss of the temple, geographical displacement, etc.) than with the appearance of their glyptic materials, which remained generally non-iconic throughout the Iron Age.

While making these subtle distinctions between art, practice, and perception does not resolve every question about the nature of Israelite worship, it does acknowledge that even in cases where anthropomorphic images are generally lacking in a particular media (as in Iron Age II Syro-Palestinian glyptics) or throughout a larger artistic repertoire (as in early first millennium Mesopotamia), religious belief was still routinely negotiated through visual practices and mental iconographies—that is, perceptions of the deity as a visible, and often anthropomorphic, being. In other words, the biblical ban on images, even in its most programmatic forms, did not do away with a visual medium of belief in Israelite religion.

6.3.2.2. The Iconic Function of Non-Iconic Art

A visual culture perspective would also call into question a second assumption about the nature of Israelite worship: that there is a one-to-one correspondence between an image's semiotic character (i.e. how it signifies) and the way in which it is put to use (i.e., its function).

As previously indicated (§6.3.1), Halbertal and Margalit imply that ancient worshipers were only tempted into idolatrous practices when dealing with similarity-based representations. Their reason for this is that the error of substitution—the replacement of the signified with the signifier—is

[156] In passing, Mettinger acknowledges that aniconic iconography does not necessarily indicate an underlying aniconic theology (*No Graven Image*, 22). Yet, throughout his work he primarily describes ANE religions as either aniconic or iconic, or as exhibiting either *de facto* aniconism or programmatic aniconism, based solely on their iconographic preferences.

more acute with images that attempt to copy the appearance of their referent in a naturalistic or mimetic fashion. Thus, Halbertal and Margalit suppose that ancient viewers were far less apt to direct their devotion or adoration to non-iconic signs since such images signify the deity indirectly through indexical associations or symbolic conventions. Or at the very least, it is assumed that when non-iconic signs were encountered in religious settings, they did not manifest the deity's presence and power in the same way or to the same degree as iconic signs. In this view, material and empty-space forms of aniconism might be associated with the deity's blessing, symbolize one of its attributes, or even imply a general sense of divine presence, but in the mind of the worshiper they were considered less real, less powerful, and indeed, less divine than anthropomorphic statuary. Thus, in Halbertal and Margalit's estimation, a religion without anthropomorphic images of the deity would have operated in fundamentally different ways than a religion with such images.

However, this conclusion is not supported by either visual culture theory or religio-historical observations. As already mentioned, Morgan's functional typology of image use emphasizes that the same image can be deployed in and through a variety of visual practices, and conversely, that very different types of images can be utilized in an analogous fashion. In fact, a religious visual culture perspective would affirm that what makes an image religiously significant—or indeed, susceptible to idolatry—is not only or even primarily its subject matter or mode of signification but rather how it is relied upon and responded in religious experience.

David Freedberg makes this very point in his study of the history and theory of visual response. He notes that iconicity is not always a prerequisite for believing that an image could manifest the power and presence of a deity (cf. §5.2.1). Freedberg points out numerous examples from ancient Greece in which gods were thought to inhabit abstract or non-anthropomorphic art objects such as unshaped meteoric stones known as *baitulia* or minimally shaped plank-like statues called *xoanan*.[157] Similarly, Zainab Bahrani argues that in Assyro-Babylonian artistic traditions, "an image can be conceived of as an essential copy [of a deity] without resemblance at the level of *eidos*, or what in Perice's terminology would be the icon."[158] What Freedberg and Bahrani both affirm is that ancient viewers sometimes treated images that might be classified as non-iconic signs in a Peircean sense in the exact same (or very similar) ways as they did anthropomorphic cult statuary. That is to say, in the psychology of at least some observers, iconic *and* non-iconic signs could both embody or even substitute for the deity itself.

[157] For further discussion and references, see Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 33–37.
[158] Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 89.

This observation is also supported by evidence from the ancient Near Eastern world. For instance, mouth-washing (*mīs pî*) and mouth-opening (*pīt pî*) consecration ceremonies, which were used to enliven anthropomorphic cult statues with the presence of the deity (§5.2.1.2), could be performed on divine symbols, such as in the case of the *uskāru* crescent of the moon god.[159] In other instances, standing stones without any markings or depictions came to be identified in name and essence with a particular god. In his study of this latter phenomenon, Karel van der Toorn suggests that the unhewn stone does not just symbolically represent a god but is actually thought to be a deified object, the god in material form.[160] Thus, some (though by no means all) standing stones could function as an object of devotion even though in Mettinger's perspective they constitute a form of material aniconism.[161]

Further evidence of this phenomenon comes from Assyro-Babylonian devotion scenes in which divine symbols take the place of anthropomorphic statues as an object of worship. For instance, many Late Babylonian (7^{th}–5^{th} c.) cylinder and stamp seals depict individuals standing before a divine symbol, such as the triangular-headed spade of Marduk, the stylus of Nabu, Nusku's lamp, the moon crescent, the star, theriomorphic pedestals, and so forth.[162] The worshiper is shown with the forearm raised slightly with an open palm (cf. **figs. 6.12–13**), which reflects a formal salutation in an audience with a deity.[163]

Similar scenes are also found on many first-millennium Babylonian monuments and *kudurrus*.[164] Beginning in the ninth century, divine symbol worship is also depicted on Neo-Assyrian monumental reliefs and free-standing stelae, and by the seventh century, this imagery became prominent on Assyrian glyptics as well.[165] In the Assyrian versions of these scenes, the

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[159] Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 109; see also, Michael B. Dick and Christopher Walker, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Mīs Pî Ritual* (SAA 1; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Institute for Asian and African Studies, University of Helsinki, 2001), 71.

[160] Karel van der Toorn, "Worshipping Stones: On the Deification of Cult Symbols," *JNSL* 23 (1997): 1–14.

[161] Ibid., 2.

[162] Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 115. The depiction of symbol worship on stamp seals became prominent during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II and continued into the early Achaemenid period. This motif seems to no longer have been in use in the fourth century, as is suggested by the absence of this type of scene in bullae discovered in Wadi ed-Daliyeh north of Jericho or Daskyleion in Phrygia (ibid., 117).

[163] In a closely related gesture, the worshiper sometimes is shown grasping a date-palm shoot as a way of indicating supplication or adoration (ibid., 118).

[164] For further discussion, see ibid., 119–29.

[165] The divine emblems in the Assyrian versions of these worship scenes include the horned mitre, the star and rosette, the winged disc, a crescent moon, the scorpion, the suck-

Figures 6.12–14. Left: Late Babylonian stamp seal of a worshiper before symbols of Marduk and Nabu mounted on a mušḫuššu pedestal. After Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 267 fig. 153. Center: Late Babylonian cylinder seal of a worshiper before divine symbols. After Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbols*, 267 fig. 154. Right: Stele of Adad-nirari III before divine symbols, Tell Rimah, 9th c. B.C.E. After Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 272 fig. 175.

worshiper is often a royal figure and is shown in the corresponding Assyrian worship gesture called *ubana taraṣu* ("finger pointing"; cf. **fig. 6.14**).[166] Admittedly, it is not always possible to conclude that images of worship provide a straightforward "illustration" of what actual worship practices looked like. Nevertheless, these and numerous other depictions of divine symbol worship strongly suggest that ancient Mesopotamian worshipers conceived of and responded to non-iconic representations of the deity in much the same way as they did to iconic ones.

Two other well-known artifacts also suggest that conventional signs could function in the place of cult statuary in the mind of ANE worshipers. One such object is the ninth-century Sippar Tablet of Nabu-apla-iddina II. The inscription on the bottom two-thirds of this artifact (especially I.1-IV.34) recounts that when the anthropomorphic cult image of Šamaš was taken away and destroyed by the Suteans in the eleventh century, a new statue was not immediately commissioned to replace it. Instead, a sun disk emblem was installed as a manifestation of the deity's cultic presence. It was only when a priest serving under Nabu-apla-iddina II supposedly "found" a model of Šamaš's image some two hundred years later that a new anthropomorphic statue was fashioned.[167]

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ling cow, the stylus of Nabu, and various floral elements. For further discussion, see Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 149–67.

[166] Ibid., 133–35.

[167] Ibid., 63–64; 111–12. See also Dick and Walker, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 58–63.

The installation of this new cult statue is depicted above the monument's inscription (**fig. 6.15**). At the center of the composition is a large sun disk emblem, which is positioned on a low bench or socle. On the left, three small figures, likely the priest, the king, and an interceding goddess, approach the sun disk. On the right and facing the divine symbol is the sun god Šamaš, enthroned under a canopy in anthropomorphic form.[168] Two figures in half profile appear near the top of the arched canopy and seem to be hoisting up the sun disk with ropes, perhaps indicating the removal of the divine symbol prior to the reinstallation of the new cult statue.[169] The very fact that the divine symbol was being replaced by an anthropomorphic image might imply, as Mettinger supposes, "that the cult statute (*ṣalmu*) enjoyed preferential status over against the sun-disk emblem (*nipḫu*)."[170] Be that as it may, the Sippar Tablet itself gives no indication that the divine symbol was treated any differently than either the old or new cult statue. In fact, once the sun disk emblem was initially installed, the cult offerings of Šamaš resumed (I.11-14).[171] Thus, even if the anthropomorphic image was preferred over the symbol, these objects seem to be interchangeable from the perspective of visual practices.

A second example comes from an inscribed cult socle found in the Ishtar temple in Aššur (**fig. 6.16**). On this object, Tukulti-Ninurta I is represented twice, once standing and once kneeling, before a cult socle that looks very similar to the artifact upon which the image is displayed. Mounted on the socle is a rectangular object with a vertical line at its center. This object has been interpreted as the double door of the temple or as a stylus and tablet. In light of the king's posture and finger pointing gesture, it is clear that these symbols represent the deity whom Tukulti-Ninurta is worshiping.[172] In fact, it is likely the case that the divine symbols pictured

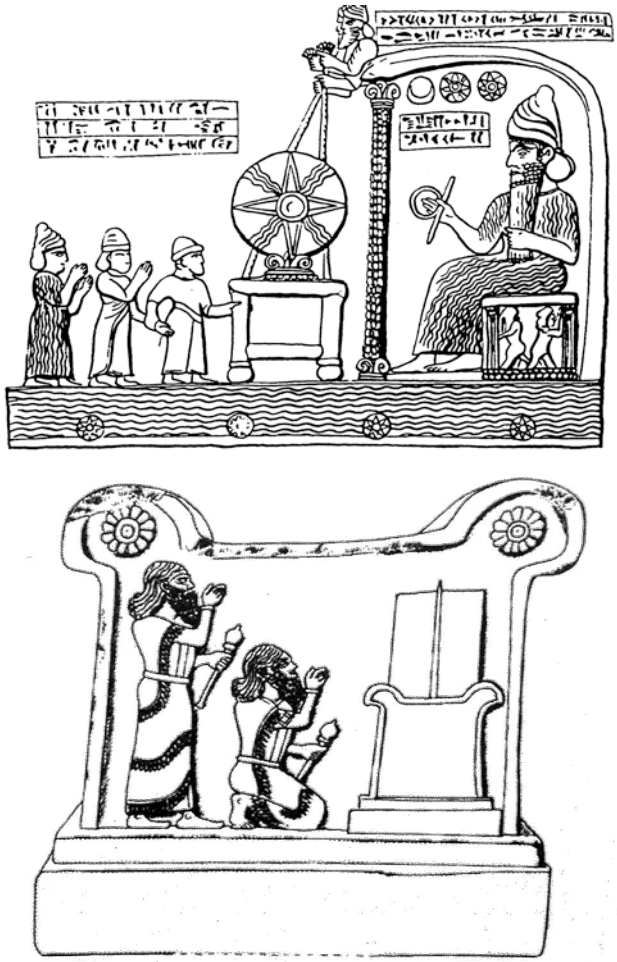
[168] Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 111.

[169] Ibid., 112.

[170] Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 48.

[171] However, at some time later, the cult declined and offerings and sacrifices ceased (I.23–II.17). There is no indication in the inscription that this development had to do with the semiotic nature of the cult object.

[172] The identity of this deity represented by these symbols is somewhat disputed. The partially preserved inscription at the bottom of the socle says that the image was made for the god Nusku. Yet, as Bahrani points out, Nusku is typically represented with a lamp symbol since he is known as the god of light (*The Graven Image*, 190). The object that appears on the socle more closely resembles the stylus and tablet, which are symbols of the god Nabu. In light of this observation, Bahrani offers the following conclusion: "[T]hough the scene depicted is described art historically as a narrative, recording a movement in time, the text in the inscription does not narrate the event in the scene. Text and image are incompatible" (ibid., 90). Regardless of the identity of the god, it is clear that the individual is depicted in an act of worship due to the finger pointing gesture.



Figures 6.15–16. Top: Sun disk emblem from the Sippar Tablet, Abu Habba, mid-9th c. B.C.E. After Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 241 fig. 65; cf. Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 48 fig. 2.7. Bottom: Tukulti-Ninurta I worshiping before a symbol socle, Ishtar temple at Aššur, 13th c. B.C.E. After Ornan, *Triumph of the Symbol*, 238 fig. 51; cf. Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 43 fig 2.2.

in this scene were at one point actually mounted upon this artifact, thus the image mirrors or repeats what the king would do in the presence of these divine symbols. Here again, we cannot be sure that this was the case—the divine symbols, after all, were not found *in situ* with the socle. And for the most part, Mesopotamian written records have very little to say about the

role of divine symbols as objects of worship.[173] However, in light of the evidence discussed above, it seems highly likely that non-iconic signs were used in place of or perhaps along with anthropomorphic statues in worship settings and that both forms of representation could manifest the real presence and power of the deity.

Though the evidence is less extensive, a similar argument can be made about the nature of Israelite worship. First, despite Halbertal and Margalit's assumption that idolatry is primarily associated with similarity-based representations, various texts in the Hebrew Bible imply that non-iconic symbols could also be the object of inappropriate worship. One possible example involves solar imagery. In Iron Age IIB glyptics, this imagery was prominent especially in the form of the two- or four-winged scarab which pushes the ball of the sun and the solar disk with wings and/or uraei.[174] Regardless of whether the bulk of these materials were produced locally or imported, they nevertheless draw on a widespread artistic tradition in the ancient Near East and Egypt of associating solar or celestial attributes with a particular deity, such as Ra, Aten, Aššur, Ahura Mazda, Baalshamem, etc. This imagery likely influenced the solar language associated with Yahweh in the book of Psalms and numerous other places in the Hebrew Bible.[175] More to the point, Ezek 8:16 and 2 Kgs 23:11 both imply that some form of solar worship was actually taking place in connection with the Jerusalem temple near the end of the seventh century.[176] Among the various cultic "abominations" that Ezekiel sees in and around the temple precincts are twenty-five individuals, presumably priests, who stand between the porch and the altar

[173] A few texts do, however, indicate that divine symbols served as cult objects. See Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 176; Lambert, "Ancient Mesopotamian Gods," 123–24.

[174] Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 256.

[175] A prominent example is Psalm 84, which applies solar language to God as a way of developing the concept of seeing Yahweh's presumably luminescent presence in the Jerusalem temple. Though not necessarily in a cultic context, other texts use the verbal root for the rising of the sun (√*zrḥ*) to describe Yahweh (Deut 33:2; Isa 60:1; Hos 6:3; see also the Kuntillet 'Ajrud inscription). Job 31:26–28 might also reflect a ritual practice centered on the sun. For a concise review of this evidence, see Mark S. Smith's chapter "Yahweh and the Sun" in *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 148–59. For a fuller treatment see Hans-Peter Stähli, *Solare Elemente im Jahweglauben des Alten Testaments* (OBO 66; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985) and Glen Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun: Biblical and Archaeological Worship in Ancient Israel* (JSOTSup 111; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).

[176] The origins of this practice may be traced either through foreign influence under the Mesopotamians or Arameans, or alternatively it might reflect an indigenous form of the Yahwistic cult. Smith has also proposed that solar imagery became assimilated to Yahweh under the impetus of the monarchy (*The Early History of God*, 153–58). See also Mordechai Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah, and Israel in the 8th and 7th Centuries B.C.E.* (SBLDS 19; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), 84–87.

"prostrating themselves to the sun toward the east" (מִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתָם קֵדְמָה לַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, Ezek 8:16). It is unclear if their worship is being directed toward the sun itself (a possibility in light of the eastern orientation of the Jerusalem temple) or toward some type of sun disk emblem that was installed within the temple. In either case, v. 16 indicates a situation in which inappropriate worship was being directed toward a non-iconic object.

Likewise, in 2 Kings 23 Josiah removes from the temple and burns numerous cult objects including "the chariots of the sun" (מַרְכְּבוֹת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, v. 11). Though sparse in details, the reference here might suggest an image of a horse-led chariot that carries the sun on its daytime journey across the sky.[177] Related iconography in which a sun disk appears above the head of a horse or occasionally a bull is found on several archaeological artifacts, including a number of clay figurines from Iron Age Lachish, Hazor, and Jerusalem, the upper register of the Taanach cult stand, and two Persian period seals from Ramat Raḥel.[178] If these artifacts give any indication of what sort of object is in view in 2 Kgs 23:11, then it seems to be the case that, at least from the perspective of the Deuteronomistic Historian, the worship of non-iconic symbols was as problematic as the worship of anthropomorphic ones.

The same might be said with respect to the asherah (הָאֲשֵׁרָה).[179] In light of biblical and inscriptional evidence, it is not altogether certain whether this cult object represented a goddess in pre-exilic Israel (possibly a consort to Yahweh), or alternatively, if it was a symbol within the cult of Yahweh that was no longer associated with the goddess.[180] For the purposes of my particular argument here, I do not wish to enter into, let alone try to resolve, the on-going debate concerning what this cult object signified. Instead, I simply want to emphasize two rather uncontroversial points about the nature and function of the asherah that, taken together, render the specific (goddess?) identification of the a/Asherah in Israelite religion—especially its possibly polytheistic nature—effectively moot.

On the one hand, there is almost no evidence to suggest that the asherah mentioned in the Hebrew Bible was anthropomorphic in form.[181] The texts

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[177] Smith, *The Early History of God*, 150.

[178] Ibid., 150–51; cf. Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 87–88.

[179] See, for instance, references to אשירה in narratives (Judg 3:7: 6:25–30; 1 Kgs 14:23; 16:33; 2 Kgs 13:6; 17:10; 21:7; 23:4, 6–7, 15; 2 Chron 24:18), in legal prohibitions (Exod. 34:13; Deut 7:5; 12:3; 16:21), and in prophetic critiques (Isa 17:8; 27:9; Jer 17:2; Micah 5:13).

[180] For a helpful survey of these two positions and the relevant biblical, epigraphic, and iconographic data, see Smith, *The Early History of God*, 125–33; and Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 210–48.

[181] One possible exception is 2 Kgs 23:7, which mentions weavings or clothes (בתים) in association with this object. The word בתים, which is somewhat unusual in this context, has been understood in light of other translations (Lucianic *stolās* = "garments" and Targumic

give every impression that it was a non-iconic symbol, likely a wooden pole or living tree that was itself derived from a stylized depiction of a tree, which in Canaanite iconography commonly symbolized, or even substituted for, the presence of the fertile and nurturing goddess Asherah.[182] On the other hand, most scholars agree that the asherah symbol (whether in the form of a pole or a stylized tree) was a regular feature of local shrines in both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms up through the eighth century.[183] While worship of this symbol was at one point tolerated, it comes under sweeping attack in later literature, where it is denounced and destroyed alongside other cult objects, including *pĕsîlîm* ("idols") and *maṣṣēbôt* (cf. Deut 7:5; 12:3; 2 Chron 33:19; 34:3, 4, 7). Thus, whatever else might be said about the asherah, it seems to clearly represent a non-iconic object that was susceptible to what Halbertal and Margalit would describe as an "error of substitution" in the mind of the worshiper (or at least the Deuteronomistic Historian). This observation reiterates the point that non-iconic objects can sometimes be treated—and more specifically, worshiped—in the same way as iconic objects, contrary to what Halbertal and Margalit would suggest.

Second, the Hebrew Bible also implies that some non-iconic signs, even when they did not explicitly function as objects of worship, could still manifest the deity's power and presence in much the same way as anthropomorphic statues. This is especially evident with respect to the ark of Yahweh/God.[184] On semiotic grounds, if the ark is understood as a footstool of the invisibly enthroned deity (1 Chr 28:2; cf. Ps 99:5; 132:7), it would qualify as an empty-space form of aniconism—that is, an indexical sign that implies but does not depict Yahweh's presence through metonymic extension.[185]

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mkwlyn = "coverings") as well the Arabic word *batt*, meaning "woven garments." For further discussion, see Smith, *The Early History of God*, 114. Some scholars have drawn a connection between 2 Kgs 23:7 and the common ancient practice of clothing anthropomorphic cult statues in Mesopotamia and Ugarit (A. Leo Oppenheim, "The Golden Garments of the Gods," *JNES* 8 [1949]: 172–93).

[182] Smith, *The Early History of God*, 233.

[183] Ibid., 108–10; For further discussion of this and other matters related to the asherah in Israelite religion, see especially Saul Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel* (SBLMS 34; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); and Judith M. Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[184] This object is variously referred to as "the ark of the covenant" (with various forms of the divine name) or "the ark of the testimony."

[185] Other cherubim thrones in Syria-Palestine, including that which is depicted on an ivory plaque from LBA Megiddo and the sarcophagus of Aḥiram, show boxlike footstools near the base of a throne. Written sources also attest that West Semitic deities, such as El, had a footstool upon which they placed their feet.

Nevertheless, as Patrick D. Miller and J. J. M. Roberts have observed, 1 Samuel 4-6 seems to treat the ark as the functional equivalent of a cult image in ancient Mesopotamian religions.[186] For example, when the Philistines learn that the ark of the LORD had come into the Israelite camp, they respond as if Yahweh himself had entered into their midst (cf. 1 Sam 4:7–8).[187] In a similar way, after they routed the Israelites in battle, the Philistines capture the ark of God and bring it back to the temple of Dagon in Ashdod (1 Sam 4:11; 5:1) in a manner that recalls the common practice of carrying off divine statuary in the context of Mesopotamian warfare (cf. §5.3.2).[188] Furthermore, in the on-going conflict between the Israelites and the Philistines, the ark functions as a manifestation of Yahweh's power: not only is the cult statue of Dagon knocked over and beheaded in the presence of the ark (1 Sam 5:1–5) but so too does this non-iconic symbol help tilt the conflict in favor of the Israelites (1 Sam 5:6–12). Eventually, the Philistines return the ark to Israel, a gesture that is also paralleled in Mesopotamian literature insofar as divine images are often sent back to their native land after a period of forced captivity.[189] In light of these observations, Miller and Roberts conclude that in 1 Samuel 4–6 the ark is not merely a cultic symbol but rather is a material realization of Yahweh's presence, status, and agency.[190]

The ark seems to play a similar role in other biblical texts. For instance, after defeating the Philistines, David brings the ark back to Jerusalem in what appears to be a dramatization of the return of Yahweh, the Divine Warrior, to his rightful abode. David's actions might be understood in light of Mesopotamian royal inscriptions that describe the legitimate king as one who restores the neglected cult.[191] Elsewhere, the ark appears to be an extension of Yahweh's essence or agency: it led the Israelites in their wilderness wanderings (Num 10:33); it was used as a war palladium (Num 14:44; 1 Sam 4:2–9); it entered the Jordan ahead of the Israelites when the waters were held back (Josh 3:11); and it was likely displayed in cultic processions

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[186] Patrick D. Miller and J. J. M. Roberts, *The Hand of the Lord: A Reassessment of the "Ark Narrative" of 1 Samuel* (JHNES; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). This argument was first put forth by Mathias Delcor ("Jahweh et Dagon: ou le Jahwisme face à la religion des Philistines, d' après 1 Sam. V," *VT* 14 [1964]: 136–54) and was also addressed by Franz Schicklberger, *Die Ladeerzählungen des ersten Samuel-Buches: Eine literaturwissenschaftliche und theologiegeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Forschung zur Bibel 7; Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1973).

[187] Miller and Roberts, *The Hand of the Lord*, 64.

[188] Ibid., 10.

[189] Ibid., 10–16.

[190] Ibid., 66.

[191] C. L. Seow, "Ark of the Covenant," *ABD* 1.392. For a fuller treatment, see also Seow's *Myth, Drama, and the Politics of David's Dance* (HSM 44; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

(2 Samuel 6; 1 Kings 8; Psalms 24, 47, 68, 132). It might even be the case that references to Yahweh dwelling in the temple or a worshiper standing before Yahweh actually allude to the presence of the ark itself.[192] This conclusion is somewhat speculative, though in Mesopotamian literature cultic images or statues were often called gods or indicated by the names of specific deities.

While it is unclear when or how the ark was lost, both Deuteronomy and P limit its role and importance by primarily describing it as a box (ארון) in which the stone tablets of the covenant are stored (Deut 10:1–5; cf. Exod 25:10–22; 37:1–9). The fact that P disassociates God from the ark might reflect a reaction to an earlier view in which the ark was intrinsically tied to the divine presence. In either case, my point once again is that from the perspective of visual practices, the ark often functioned in ways that were broadly analogous to how anthropomorphic cult statues were used in other ANE cultures.

One final observation underscores the iconic function of non-iconic art in Israelite religion. In his contribution to *The Image and the Book*, van der Toorn suggests that there was a functional correspondence between the cult of divine images in ANE religions and the veneration of the Torah in ancient Israel.[193] In van der Toorn's estimation, the Torah was more than just an archive of written stories and religious principles—in a more material sense, it also functioned as a sacred object that was endowed with a spiritual power in its own right. Van der Toorn argues that as a type of "icon" the Torah was seen as much as it was read in Israelite society, and as a result, it could take the place of images in certain religious practices.[194] For instance, van der Toorn points out that the Israelites were commanded to display the Shema on their doorposts and gates (Deut 11:20) perhaps in place of images.[195] Similarly, they were told to bind God's word upon the body (Deut 11:18), whereas it was customary to wear images as amulets often for apotropaic purposes.

Furthermore, van der Toorn suggests that a functional analogy exists between the cult image and the Torah in numerous other customs in early Judaism: (1) while the Babylonian army brought divine statues into battle,

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[192] Seow, "Ark of the Covenant," in *ABD* 1.387.

[193] Van der Toorn, "The Iconic Book: Analogies between the Babylonian Cult of Images and the Veneration of the Torah," in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religions in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. Karel van der Toorn; CBET 21; Leuven: Peters, 1997), 229–48.

[194] Ibid., 231.

[195] Ibid., 241. In the ancient Near Eastern world, images were often found on the gates of prominent buildings, such as the famous Balawat gates of Ashurbanipal II's Northwest palace at Nimrud. One should also note the practice of Egyptian pharaoh's having their names written on gates and doorposts as well as stelae being placed in gateways such as at Bethsaida / et–Tell.

the Mishnah says that the king should carry a copy of the Torah on military expeditions (*Sanh.* 2:4); (2) when a new Torah scroll was made, it was carried in procession from the workshop to its new home, not unlike the type of rituals that occurred along with the mouth-washing ceremony; (3) solemn oaths were often made by touching a statue of a deity in ANE religions but in Judaism oaths were made by laying one's hands upon the holy book; and (4) Jewish theology about the pre-existent origins and divine nature of the Torah closely mirrors the Babylonian mythology of the origins and nature of cult statutes.[196] In light of van der Toorn's observations, it seems that even texts—the polar opposite of an icon in Peircean semiotics—can function in ways that are remarkably similar to anthropomorphic cult statues.[197]

Each of these examples from ANE visual culture confirm what is implied in Morgan's functional typology: namely, that there is no one-to-one correspondence between how an image signifies and the way in which it is put to use. Morgan's perspective can shed light on the iconic function of non-iconic objects such as divine symbols, the ark, or even the Torah. In addition, it also highlights the fact that when seen from the perspective of visual practices, Israelite religion was not as different from other ANE religions as is sometimes thought.[198] Instead of seeing Israelite religion as an entirely aniconic "religion of the book" and other ANE religions as being image centered, I want to emphasize the fact that both types of religions rely on a broadly analogous set of visual practices and visual responses.

In this sense, it would be helpful to approach the comparative study of ANE religions in terms of the seventh category in Morgan's functional typology: rival iconographies. The primary difference between ANE religions is not so much the presence or absence of a visual medium of belief, but rather how experiences of the divine—and different deities—are visually negotiated and structured by a competing set of images and material objects. This would suggest that the history of Israelite religion should be characterized not in terms of a unidirectional movement from iconism to aniconism (or even *de facto* aniconism to programmatic aniconism) but rather in terms of an on-going tension between competing iconographies. Thus construed, one of the main themes that emerges in Israelite religion is not its aversion to images *tout court* but the way in which different types of visual materials come to displace one another because of what are likely complex religious, political, and social factors.

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[196] Van der Toorn, "The Iconic Book," 243–47.

[197] For further discussion of the "material culture" of the book, see James W. Watts, *Iconic Books and Texts* (Bristol, Conn.: Equinox, 2013).

[198] This is not to say that Israelite religion had no distinctive features or that its relationship with divine images was identical to that found in Mesopotamian religions.

6.3.3. Assessment

The goal of this section was to explore how the definition of aniconism and the characterization of Israelite worship might be reframed in light of evidence concerning ancient visual practices. Two broad conclusions emerge from this analysis, both of which attempt to expand the analytic scope of research on Israelite religion in light of theories and perspectives from religious visual culture.

First, despite the fact that iconic forms of representation signify in somewhat different ways than non-iconic ones, the latter still functioned as an important part of the visual medium of belief in Israelite religion. That is to say, indexical and conventional signs are no less material, and indeed no less visual, than similarity-based (i.e., "iconic") images. All types of visual representation are experienced through the apparatus of sight and thus might be characterized as a visual medium of belief. In my estimation, this point is not adequately emphasized in past research on Israel's aniconic tradition. As a result, the study of Israelite religion would be advanced in fruitful ways if researchers—be they art historians, archaeologists, or history of religion scholars—began to move beyond traditional questions about what types of images the biblical text prohibits or what sorts of materials have been found in the archaeological record and instead focused more attention on the role of visual practices in Israelite religion.

Second, when seen from the perspective of the visual medium of belief, Israelite religion seems far less aniconic than some have supposed. On this score, I largely agree with Uehlinger and a growing number of other scholars (though still a minority) who believe that Israelite religion, especially in the pre-exilic period, was generally iconic. However, I come to this conclusion for different reasons—and with regard to different referents—than these other scholars. My argument does not hinge on proving that certain material artifacts represent iconic depictions of the deity or that the mere presence of an image ban presupposes the use of divine images by some portion of the population.[199] Rather, my conclusion emerges from a reconsideration of what counts as evidence for iconic cults in the first place.

Throughout Israelite history, worshipers consistently relied upon visual materials in their experience of the divine, and they often responded to non-iconic art objects in ways that are at least analogous to—and at times iden-

[199] For his part, Mettinger argues that the second commandment is based on an already existing convention of *not* using images of the deity in worship (*No Graven Image*, 16). However, some scholars conclude quite the opposite. Uehlinger contends that the prohibitions against images in the Decalogue imply that images were, in fact, being worshiped—that is, the image ban targets a current practice ("Judahite Aniconism vs. Edomite Iconic Cult," 84). While not specifically addressing Israelite aniconism, Freedberg also maintains that strictures against images presuppose an already existing belief in the power and agency of certain art objects (*The Power of Images*, 60).

tical with—how their neighbors treated anthropomorphic statuary. Thus, even if it could be proven that ancient Israelites never had anthropomorphic images of their deity, a visual culture perspective would still question whether Israelite religion should be classified as an aniconic tradition without further qualification. One of these "further qualifications" would address how the second major concern of Morgan's research—religious ways of seeing—affected the way in which Israelite viewers interpreted religious visual imagery in the first place.

6.4. The Search for Yahweh's Image: A Visual Culture Approach

Arguably the most debated issue in the study of Israelite religion is whether (or perhaps *when*) ancient Israel had cult images of Yahweh. This question has generated considerable interest—and a good deal of controversy—within biblical scholarship in the past several decades. Numerous studies have attempted to evaluate both direct and indirect evidence for the existence of Yahweh's image during the pre-monarchic, monarchic, and even post-exilic periods. While these studies often employ sophisticated archaeological, textual, and iconographic modes of analysis, the search for Yahweh's image has not yet taken into account the theories and perspectives that guide the study of religious visual culture.

In this section I explore the effects of the *religious apparatus of sight* in the ancient world, including how religious knowledge and beliefs might have come to shape the way in which Israelite viewers processed visual data and/or came to visualize their deity in specific art objects. In order to do so, I first briefly review some of the commonly cited evidence in the search for Yahweh's image, noting some of the possibilities and problems involved in determining whether a given artifact depicts Israel's God (§6.4.1). Second, I draw on several lines of evidence that, taken together, make a case that ancient Israelites likely repurposed or "re-visioned" artistic imagery in light of underlying religious perspectives (§6.4.2).

6.4.1. Reviewing the Evidence

While space prohibits an extensive review of even the most widely discussed evidence for Yahweh's image, it will be instructive to highlight several potentially compelling candidates in the search process. The goal in doing so is not to argue that certain material artifacts or textual references prove beyond doubt that ancient Israel had images of its deity. But neither is the aim to dismiss this possibility outright simply because some of these artifacts cannot be unambiguously identified as representing Yahweh. Rather, I want to offer a mediating position that, on the one hand, acknowl-

edges the lack of conclusive material or textual evidence for the existence of Yahweh's image and, on the other hand, allows for the possibility that certain religious ways of seeing might have led Israelite viewers to see their deity even in images that may not have been originally intended to depict Yahweh. In other words, I want to underscore that iconographic and archaeological considerations are *not the only point*—and might even be somewhat *beyond the point*—when it comes to determining whether ancient Israelite viewers encountered Yahweh in the visual arts.

The search for Yahweh's image traditionally has entailed the close analysis of diverse material realia from Iron Age Syria-Palestine. Scholars such as Christoph Uehlinger and Theodore J. Lewis have recently looked for traces of Yahweh's image in a wide variety of artifacts, including male and female statuary, pillar figurines, goddess imagery, theriomorphic and zoomorphic representations, astral and solar imagery, cult stands, shrine models, *maṣṣēbôt*, and "empty-space" iconographies.[200] While many of these objects seem to have played an important role in the cultic sphere and at least a few of them are thought to be closely associated with the deity, it is not possible to establish irrefutably that any of these objects were originally meant to depict Yahweh.[201]

Several examples are of note. In the oft-discussed case of pithos A from Kuntillet ʿAjrud (**fig. 6.17**), art historical and iconographic considerations have led most scholars to conclude that: (1) the various figures in his scene do not constitute a coherent composition in their own right; and (2) the two figures at the center of the drawing are best understood as Bes-like *Mischwesen* and not as Yahweh and his Asherah, despite the overlapping inscription, which reads "Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah…" (though see §6.4.2 for further discussion).[202] Another intriguing, but ultimately unsuccessful, candidate is the so-called Munich terracotta (**fig. 6.18**), which was acquired by Jörg Jeremias in 1990 at a Jerusalem antiquities market.[203] Uehlinger is quite optimistic that this artifact might represent "precisely what scholars have tried, in vain, to find for so long: an 8th-century Judahite figural representation of 'Yahweh and his Asherah.'"[204] However, in light of its damaged condition and overall lack of detail, it would be difficult to

[200] Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," esp. 102–39; Lewis, "Divine Images and Aniconism in Ancient Israel," esp. 42–50.

[201] Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 152; Lewis, "Divine Images and Aniconism," 51.

[202] For further discussion, see Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 210–224; Pirhiya Beck, "The Drawings from Horvat Teimen (Kuntillet ʿAjrud), *Tel Aviv* 9 (1982): 3–58.

[203] Jörg Jeremias, "Thron oder Wagen? Eine außergewöhnliche Terrakotte aus der späten Eisenzeit in Judah," in *Biblische Welten: Festschrift für Martin Metzger zu seinem 65. Geburtstag* (ed. Martin Metzger and Wolfgang Zwickel; OBO 123; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 40–59.

[204] Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 151.

conclude with any degree of confidence that this object depicts Yahweh and his consort seated upon a throne, flanked by attendant sphinxes.[205]

In addition, the search for Yahweh's image is complicated by ambiguities regarding a given object's function. For example, some ANE deities could be shown in theriomorphic form, thus making it possible to interpret animal figurines found in ancient Israel as divine representations. However, it is also possible that these animal figurines were not utilized as images *of* Yahweh but rather were presented *to* Yahweh as a votive offering. Alternatively these same images might have functioned as pedestals *for* the invisible deity (a form of empty-space aniconism).[206] Even in cases where divine statues are found in cultic contexts, such as with the Ḥorvat Qiṭmīt sanctuary in the northern Negev, the extent to which those sites reflect officially sanctioned Israelite religion (as opposed to Edomite religion in the case of Ḥorvat Qiṭmīt) remains somewhat unclear.[207] For these reasons, the evidence for the existence of divine images in pre-exilic Israel is intriguing but ultimately inconclusive from a strictly iconographic perspective.[208]

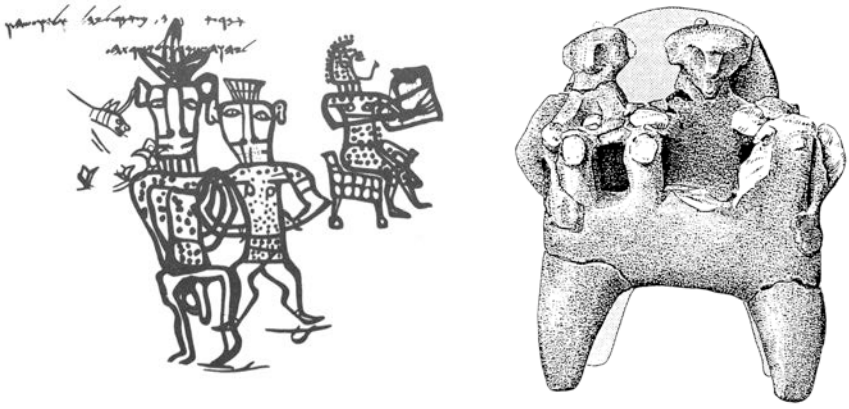
Nevertheless, these observations do not by themselves prove that ancient Israel lacked divine images. In other ANE cultures, divine statues, which were often made from precious metals, were often the target of theft and looting and thus are only infrequently attested in the archaeological record. If a similar situation obtained in ancient Israel—and it did, if the ark

[205] Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 151–52.

[206] Lewis, "Divine Images and Aniconism," 47–48. For the possibility of animal figures as pedestals for the deity see Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 137. See also Roger Moorey's discussion of terracotta figurines in Israel and Judah in *Idols of the People: Miniature Images of Clay in the Ancient Near East* (Schweich lectures 2001; New York: Published by the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2003), esp. 47–68.

[207] Uehlinger, "Judahite Aniconism vs. Edomite Iconic Cult," 80–112.

[208] In my estimation, one of the difficulties encountered in the search for Yahweh's image is establishing what would constitute conclusive iconographical evidence in the first place. For instance, in discussions of pithos A from Kuntillet ʻAjrud, it is often suggested that the two central figures reflect Egyptian Bes iconography and thus cannot represent Yahweh and his Asherah. Perhaps so, but this does not directly address the question of what northern Sinai Yahweh/Asherah iconography would actually look like or how one would recognize Yahweh imagery if she saw it. Likewise, even if one knew that the Munich terracotta was intended to represent Yahweh and his Asherah (perhaps through an inscription?), the poorly preserved images on this object hardly would establish a precise iconographic profile that could be used to evaluate other images. Nevertheless, one might reasonably suppose that Yahweh's iconography would reflect characteristics known about Israel's God from textual data, such as Yahweh's association with a cherubim throne, lion imagery, solar imagery, wings, archers, and so forth. In addition, one would also need to consider information about the context in which an image is found, its function, its relation to the cult, and as I argue in the remainder of this section, how ancient viewers might have interpreted the object in light of their prior religious beliefs and knowledge.



Figs. 6.17–18. Left: Close up of Pithos A from Kuntillet ʻAjrud, northeastern Sinai, early-9th / late-8th c. After Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 213 fig. 220; cf. Coogan, *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, 309. Right: Munich Terracotta, Judah, likely late-8th or early-7th c. After Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 150 fig. 61. cf. Jeremias, "Thron oder Wagen?," 41–59.

narrative is to be believed—then the absence of archaeological evidence of Yahweh's image should not necessarily be seen as evidence of its historical absence. In fact, some biblical scholars have attempted to infer the existence of Israelite divine images *apart from* concrete archaeological data. For instance, Karel van der Toorn reasons that while in Deuteronomy and P the ark is consistently described as a receptacle for the covenant tablets, at an earlier—and less iconoclastic—point in Israelite history the ark actually was used to store an image or symbol of Yahweh.[209] Likewise, some scholars have suggested that the holy of holies in the Second Temple period was not, as Josephus suggests (*J.W.* 5.219), completely empty but rather was occupied by a divine image until the Hasmonean period at which point it was removed during the re-dedication of the temple.[210] The mention of Hezekiah's removal of the bronze serpent (called Nehushtan in 2 Kgs 18:4) from the temple might also imply the presence of a Yahweh-related image. Though intriguing, these suggestions remain largely unsubstantiated.

Much of the same can be said of Herbert Niehr's belief that certain expressions in the Hebrew Bible, such as references to seeing Yahweh's face, the procession of God into the sanctuary, and the enthronement of the deity in the temple, are most naturally understood as implying the existence of Yahweh's cult statue.[211] While I agree that the nature of Israelite worship

[209] Van der Toorn, "The Iconic Book," 242.

[210] For further discussion and references, see Herbert Niehr, "In Search of YHWH's Cult Statue," in *The Image and the Book*, 95.

[211] Ibid., 81–90.

during the pre-exilic period was far less aniconic than many scholars have suggested, this does not require that anthropomorphic language about God directly emerges from an experience with an anthropomorphic cult object.

Still others have looked to Assyrian royal inscriptions and palace wall reliefs (cf. **figs. 5.6–7**) for indirect evidence that the Israelites had divine cult statues.[212] In both written and pictorial accounts of Neo-Assyrian military campaigns, references are made to soldiers removing cult statuary as booty (or more accurately, as prisoners of war; cf. §5.3.2) from Syro-Palestinian cities.[213] Though it is certainly plausible that these materials bear witness to the existence of anthropomorphic divine images in Israel, one cannot fully rule out the possibility that the spoliation of cult statues was a stock element in the iconography of Assyrian conquest or that it was a literary topos in Assyrian royal inscriptions.[214] Thus, while ANE sources should be taken seriously in the study of Israelite religion, even these materials do not provide decisive evidence for the existence of an image of Yahweh.

In light of this and other data, one must provisionally conclude that the search for Yahweh's image, at least as it has been traditionally pursued, has come up somewhat empty. However, this observation need not imply that Israelite religion was exclusively or essentially aniconic. As I have already argued, a consideration of *the visual medium of belief* can draw attention to the fact that ancient Israelites materialized faith in a variety of visual forms (§6.3.2.1) and often responded to non-iconic objects in ways that are remarkably similar to how anthropomorphic cult statues are treated in other ANE religions (§6.3.2.2). I now want to press this point further, this time

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[212] See, for instance, several contributions to *The Image and the Book*, including Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 123–38; Niehr, "In Search of YHWH's Cult Statue," 73–95; and Bob Becking, "Assyrian Evidence for Iconic Polytheism in Ancient Israel?" in *The Image and the Book*, 157–71.

[213] The most prominent written accounts come from several inscriptions related to Tiglath-Pileser III's campaign against Gaza (ca. 734 B.C.E.), Sargon II's campaigns against Samaria (as mentioned in the Nimrud Prism, ca. 722/720) and Ashdod (ca. 711), and Sennacherib's campaign against Ashkelon (ca. 701). Iconographic evidence is found on reliefs from Tiglath-Pileser III's palace at Nimrud (slab r-36-lower), Sargon II's palace at Khorsabad (Room V, slabs 5.4.3-upper), and Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh (Room X slab 11).

[214] However, Uehlinger contends that the motif of Assyrian soldiers carrying away cult statues from a conquered town, whether in text or image, is best understood as relating to an actual historical event and are *not* mere stock elements in iconography or literary topos in royal inscriptions ("Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 128). See also idem, "'Und wo sind die Götter von Samarien?' Die Wegführung syrisch-palästinischer Kultstatuen auf einem Relief Sargons II in Khorsabad/Dür-Sarrukïn," in *Und Mose schrieb dieses Lied auf: Studien zum Alten Testament und zum Alten Orient: Festschrift für Oswald Loretz zur Vollendung seines 70. Lebensjahres mit Beiträgen von Freunden, Schülern und Kollegen* (ed. Oswald Loretz, Manfried Dietrich, and Ingo Kottsieper; AOAT 250; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1998), 739–76.

by returning to the second dimension of religious visual culture—that is, *the religious apparatus of sight*.

6.4.2. Religious Ways of Seeing

Visual culture theorists such as Morgan emphasize that seeing is never simply a function of biological perception, nor is it always rigidly governed by knowledge of iconographic conventions or art historical contexts (§6.2.2). Rather, seeing is a thoroughly engaged, purposeful, and constructive activity that is deeply informed by underlying beliefs, values, and religious knowledge. As a result, viewers play an active role in the meaning-making process and are capable of accepting, opposing, or reimagining predominant interpretations of an image based on the unique set of epistemological lenses or "covenants" that condition their gaze. In this view, religious ways of seeing not only structure how viewers interpret visual data but also open up the possibility that they come to look for or even recognize religiously meaningful content in art objects in ways that do not fully reflect their intended purpose or original meaning.

However, the potential effects of religious ways of seeing are rarely if ever taken into account in the search for Yahweh's image. In practice, a rather straightforward connection is often assumed between the meaning intended by an image's original producers and the meaning received by its subsequent viewers. According to this logic, in order to conclude that an Israelite viewer saw their deity in a given art object it would have to be proven that the image unambiguously represented Yahweh on iconographic grounds. While this supposition is not unreasonable, it faces several difficulties. As discussed in §6.3.1, the notion of "iconic" representations of Yahweh or any other deity is problematized in at least three ways: (1) our inability to assess whether a divine image resembles its referent; (2) the non-mimetic nature of much ANE art; and (3) the coexistence of multiple bodies or "iconic" forms of the same deity. However, what is even more problematic is the fact that this perspective fails to acknowledge that the on-going meaning an image receives is generated through a complex interaction between the image, its viewers, and the social, cultural, and religious contexts in which subsequent acts of seeing take place. In other words, religious beliefs can substantially influence not only how one processes visual data but also what one thinks one sees in an image in the first place.

Throughout his research, Morgan presents numerous examples of how religious viewers ascribe new meanings to existing art objects in light of their unique theological contexts and beliefs. This phenomenon often occurs in cross-cultural religious encounters, such as when missionaries appropriate indigenous art, symbols, rituals, and holy sites for use in Christian

worship.[215] An interesting example is offered by nineteenth-century religion scholar F. C. Conybeare, who recounts how a Jesuit priest once urged the inhabitants of a Pacific island to ascribe the name "Francis of Assisi" to one of their tribal statues.[216] If this community came to believe that their statue depicted the Italian saint it was only because their Christian belief (they were said to be converts) fostered a new way of seeing in which they apprehended this image not through a mimetic covenant but through what Morgan would call an expressivist or allegorical covenant. That is, they came to see the statue as a visual emblem for Francis of Assisi's spirit or essence even though it did not in any way resemble his actual appearance.[217] Numerous other examples might be cited of how the meaning of a religious image is transformed when it migrates between different theological or cultural contexts. I describe this phenomenon as a type of repurposing or "re-visioning" of religious imagery—that is, the ascription of new meaning to already existing art objects.

While Morgan's research tends to focus on more contemporary faith communities and art objects, there is no reason to suppose that religious ways of seeing had any less of an effect in the ancient world. Israelite viewers, not unlike the subjects in Morgan's *Visual Piety*, might well have looked with a devotional gaze upon a variety of different images, even those known to depict other ANE deities, and thought to themselves: "That's Yahweh!"[218] Or they might have attempted to make pictures of foreign kings or drawings of non-anthropomorphic creatures more familiar and meaningful by seeing in them a type of visual metaphor that conveyed the essence or spirit of their deity (as in the above example of Francis of Assisi).

If scholars interested in Israelite religion were to take Morgan's understanding of religious ways of seeing seriously, they would need to rethink some of their conclusions regarding the (non)existence of Yahweh's image. For instance, several of the artifacts discussed above as possible candidates for Yahweh's image probably would need to be dismissed from the search process on strictly iconographic grounds, or at least, would need to be retained in a possible-but-not-certain state of limbo. Nevertheless, when seen from the perspective of visual culture theory, it would still be possible to

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[215] For further discussion, see Morgan's chapter "The Circulation of Images in Mission History," in *The Sacred Gaze*, 147–87.

[216] Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols,* 4.36.

[217] In other instances, religious imagery can be detached from its original theological context and used to symbolize a concept that is at cross-purposes with the moral vision of the religion from which it came. Morgan refers to the application of images to religious or political ends other than those sought by the missionary as a form of "expropriation" (*The Sacred Gaze*, 163–65).

[218] See Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 43, 122 for the corresponding discussion about reactions to Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ.*

conclude that these same objects may have appeared quite Yahweh-like to some ancient viewers who saw them in light of particular sacred gazes or image covenants.

This perspective would reframe some of the observations Keel and Uehlinger have made in *GGG* regarding the interpretation of divine symbols. While these (and other) scholars often draw close parallels between Israel's theological conception of Yahweh and prominent motifs in Syro-Palestinian art, they ultimately stop short of concluding that certain images depict Yahweh. For instance, Keel and Uehlinger acknowledge the pronounced solar orientation of religious imagery in eighth-century Judah, and they recognize that literary metaphors that speak of Yahweh shining forth or having other luminous properties are congruent with the visual motifs found on winged scarabs or other types of sun disk imagery.[219] They even go so far as to suggest that in Judah, Yahweh was principally conceived of as the actual sun god.[220] And yet, while Yahweh might be described in literary texts in the role of a solar deity, to my knowledge, Keel and Uehlinger never suggest that something similar might be said of the visual arts—that is, that a sun disk scarab was understood by Israelites to represent Yahweh in an explicit manner.

However, in light of the many conceptual links that exist between solar imagery and Israel's God, it is at least plausible, if not highly likely, that an Israelite viewer would have come to believe that the real power and presence of Yahweh was manifest in and through a variety of solar images in Syro-Palestinian art. In fact, the theoretical insights from religious ways of seeing indicate that Israelite viewers may have been led to see or recognize their deity in a variety of art objects *even if those objects were originally intended to display a different subject matter, or indeed, a different god*. This possibility is entirely consistent with visual culture theory—indeed, it is derived from it—but, of course, its viability in religio-historical research hinges on whether there is any evidence to suggest that this type of repurposing of religious imagery actually occurred in ancient Israelite religion. I turn to this issue now.

6.4.3. Repurposing Religious Imagery

Definitively proving that ancient viewers experienced Yahweh in non-Yahwistic art is, to say the least, an extremely difficult task, and may well be impossible. After all, scholars do not have access to the type of ethnographic data (letters, surveys, etc.) that are so crucial to, for example, Morgan's study of Christian responses to Warner Sallman's paintings of Christ.

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[219] Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 265–77.

[220] Ibid., 277.

Nevertheless, an investigation of the effects of religious ways of seeing in the ancient world need not devolve into wild speculation or "anything goes" suggestions about visual interpretation and/or viewer response. Though somewhat circumstantial, three lines of evidence can be adduced to support the notion that Israelite viewers may well have come to see and interpret religious imagery in light of their underlying beliefs and religious knowledge.

6.4.3.1. The Image-Text Dialectic

First and most generally, there is good reason to believe that written texts, whether religious or otherwise, influenced how ancient viewers read and interpreted images. This idea emerges out of the previous discussion regarding the nature of the image-text relationship. In chapter 3, I noted how W. J. T. Mitchell emphasizes that the interaction between visual and verbal data is always (at least potentially) dialectical in nature. From this vantage point, Mitchell not only problematizes the simple resolution of word and image into discrete categories of signs but he also tends to describe the mutual interaction between visual and verbal media in terms of the visuality of texts and the textuality of vision (§3.3.1). In speaking of this latter issue, Mitchell contends that every form of art, whether ancient or modern, abstract or mimetic, depends at least in part on knowledge of the content of written materials, the logic of textuality, and/or an underlying discourse of literary criticism and philosophy. Thus, in addition to suggesting that images can be read as a type of language, Mitchell also highlights the fact that visual experiences can be fraught with verbal or textual background.

As I have shown with respect to the Behistun relief, Mitchell's theory of the image-text dialectic can shed new light on visual-verbal interactions in ancient art objects (§3.3.3). For instance, textual data can potentially inform and direct an observer's visual experience of the imagery on the Behistun relief in numerous ways: (1) when read from left to right, the compositional arrangement of the central scene displays a Subject → Object/Verb syntax that is roughly parallel to the word order found in each of the three languages on the monument; (2) the placement of the captions within the visual frame of the paneled sculpture functions to direct the gaze of the viewer toward the most important figures in the image;[221] and (3) knowledge of the

[221] Due to the great distance between the relief and the nearest point of observation, the viewer of the Behistun relief would not have been able to make out the specific letters or words in the various captions. However, it would have most likely been possible to detect that the captions existed. That is to say, while the captions were visible (i.e., their presence would have been noticed) they were not legible. As an example, it is often possible to detect the presence of a road sign at some great distance ahead even though the particular content of that sign is not yet discernable.

summary text, which was widely distributed throughout Darius's empire, would have enabled viewers to understand the highly symbolic "visual précis" pictured on the monument in terms of more historically-specific events associated with the ascension of Darius. Thus, even though the content of the inscriptions would not have been legible to observers who peered up at the monument from some 300 feet below, it is still possible to conclude that the Behistun iconography was seen by ancient viewers in light of the placement, logic, and content of textual materials, at least at some times and some places.

The potential for visual-verbal interactions is not limited to ancient monumental reliefs and may, in fact, come to bear on artifacts that pertain to the search for Yahweh's image. One particularly important example is pithos A from Kuntillet ʿAjrud (**fig. 6.17**). As previously mentioned, scholars generally agree that on iconographic grounds the two central figures should *not* be identified as Yahweh and his Asherah despite the accompanying inscription. In fact, much of the secondary literature argues that the image and overlapping inscription should be disassociated from one another since the ink of the inscription goes over the drawing and thus was most likely added at a later point and by a different person.[222]

However, Brian B. Schmidt offers a different perspective.[223] He believes that prior research on pithos A has been characterized by an "overly simplistic separation of the depictions and the accompanying inscriptional references . . . solely on the basis of what has been deemed as the presence of Bes iconography."[224] That is, scholars tend to believe that the inscription cannot refer to the image since the iconography of the two figures is not congruent with the textual data. In contrast, Schmidt imagines the image-text relationship from the vantage point of what might be called the "final redactor" of the artifact. When seen in this light, Schmidt contends that

> the confluence of figures and inscription may have in fact conveyed a significant, unified field of meaning! Assuming that the parts comprising the final scene are to be related as a single unit . . . it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that by recording the inscription, someone consciously sought to interpret the drawings as a depiction of Yahweh and his Asherah.[225]

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[222] Beck, "The Drawings from Horvat Teiman," 36, 43; Walter A. Maier, *Asherah: Extrabiblical Evidence* (HSM 37; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986); Judith M. Hadley, "Some Drawings and Inscriptions on Two Pithoi from Kuntillet ʿAjrud," *VT* 37 (1987): 180–213; Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 210–40.

[223] Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition," 75–105, esp. 96–105.

[224] Ibid., 99.

[225] Ibid., 97–98.

Like Schmidt, I also think that past research on pithos A has too readily downplayed the possibility of visual-verbal interaction on this artifact. However, my line of reasoning ultimately proceeds in a different direction.

First, Schmidt's argument seems to depend on establishing a historical-critical point about the object's production: namely, that by adding the inscription in such close proximity to the drawing the inscriber *consciously* sought to interpret the image in light of the text. In my view, this is possible but far from certain—and more importantly, this point is not critical to my overall argument about the implications of the image-text dialectic. Mitchell's theory of visual-verbal interactions does not hinge on establishing the intention of the original author or even the "final redactor." Texts can and do influence how later viewers interpret images even in cases where the two forms of media were not created at the same time or were not originally intended to be read together. Thus, whether or not the inscription and image overlap by "pure coincidence" (as Uehlinger argues) or because the inscriber wanted to create "a significant, unified field of meaning" (as Schmidt argues) is somewhat beside the point for the purposes of my argument, which, in essence, is about the reception of visual imagery not its production.[226]

When seen from the perspective of Mitchell's image-text dialect, later viewers (provided they could read) might well have come to understand the image of the two Bes figures as Yahweh and his Asherah in light of the words of the inscription, regardless of the circumstances surrounding the production of the object, or more specifically, the addition of the inscription. It would be difficult, of course, to prove that this happened. However, when one considers the nature of the image-text dialectic, it would only be surprising if the majority of ancient viewers—who were likely unfamiliar with the composition history of this artifact and/or the distinctive features of Bes iconography—disassociated the visual and verbal data on this artifact in the way that many scholars do today. At the very least, arguments about the artifact's composition history and iconographic conventions should not be the *only* considerations that impinge on how scholars assess whether this object constitutes an image of Yahweh.

The second problem with Schmidt's reasoning has to do with why he believes it was possible for the inscriber to interpret the drawings as a depiction of Yahweh and his Asherah. Schmidt argues that while the biblical texts prohibit the production of anthropomorphic and theriomorphic images of Yahweh, they do *not* explicitly ban images of *Mischwesen*—that is, composite entities that include a mixture of anthropomorphic and theriomorphic forms.[227] Schmidt proposes that the Bes-like *Mischwesen* on pithos A would have represented a legitimate Yahwistic iconography in the eyes

[226] Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 146.

[227] Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition," 95.

of the inscriber, thus making the inscription "Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah" an acceptable label for the image. Though interesting, Schmidt's proposal is not persuasive. As Uehlinger points out, Deut 4:15–16 does not seem to allow for *Mischwesen* imagery since it bases its prohibition against making an idol "in the form of any figure" (תמונת כל סמל) on the idea that the people saw "no form" (לא ראיתם כל תמונה) when the Lord spoke to them at Horeb.[228] In addition, Uehlinger rightly points out that the lack of an explicit ban on *Mischwesen* in the biblical texts might be due to the fact that such imagery was only rarely associated with deities in Syro-Palestinian art.[229]

Despite these important critiques, there might be another way to argue the point. Every formulation of the biblical image ban prohibits the *making* (√*'śh*) of images of Yahweh (cf. Exod 20:4, 23; 34:17; Lev 19:4; 26:1; Deut 4:16; 5:8). What is not clear is whether the spirit of the law also extended to *seeing* images *as* Yahweh. Did the image ban allow room for Israelites to recognize Yahweh in the visual arts as long as they did not make or worship such imagery? Would the interpretation of a non-Yahwistic image (such as Bes-like *Mischwesen*) as Yahweh constitute a mode of production? The biblical texts do not provide clear answers to these questions, and so I merely wish to raise the possibility—admittedly, a speculative one—that the image ban focused primarily on the production of idols and less on their "reception" by later viewers. Or, at the very least, it is worth noting that it would have been far more difficult to *enforce* a commandment that prohibited seeing Yahweh in non-Yahwistic art than one that prohibited making images that were intended to be Yahweh in the first place.

Nevertheless, unlike Schmidt, my argument does not hinge on establishing the scope of the biblical image ban. In this sense, I agree with Uehlinger's skepticism about Schmidt's line of reasoning when he says, "I would concede that the Bes identification cannot rule out *per se* a correlation of the drawing with 'Yahweh and his Asherah' but it must be part of a broader argument."[230] In my estimation, this broader argument—which neither Schmidt nor Uehlinger ultimately provides—emerges from theories about the image-text dialectic. As already noted, Mitchell stresses the idea that it is difficult to keep discourse out of the visual arts. Viewers tend to see in light of what they read or know from textual materials. Thus, even if the biblical texts do explicitly prohibit *Mischwesen* imagery, and even if the image ban extends to seeing and not just making divine images, then it might still have been the case that some ancient viewers (again, provided that they were literate) would have interpreted the image in light of information gleaned from the inscription. To reiterate, I do not mean to suggest

[228] Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 144.
[229] Ibid., 144.
[230] Ibid., 145.

that the central figures were originally intended to represent Yahweh and his Asherah or even that the inscription was added in order to create a "unified field of meaning" (as Schmidt argues). Instead, I merely want to press the point that visual-verbal interactions may occur *regardless of iconographic conventions or religious commandments*. Put simply, the impulse to see Yahweh in light of the inscription on pithos A is consistent with the theory of the image-text dialectic.

Though I admit that this conclusion is somewhat difficult to prove, it generally seems to reflect the type of visual-verbal interaction that Mitchell argues is present on both ancient and modern artifacts. Furthermore, the idea that texts influence visual processing is consistent with Morgan's understanding of the effects of religious ways of seeing. As discussed above, seeing is a thoroughly engaging, purposeful, and constructive activity that is deeply informed by underlying religious knowledge, at least some of which is derived from reading (or hearing) texts. If I am correct in drawing these connections, then the search for Yahweh's image would need to reconsider how knowledge of written texts, whether from the inscription on pithos A or from the metaphors and similes used to characterize Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible, might have led viewers to identify Yahweh in images that, on (art) historical grounds, were never meant to depict their deity. I return to this point below, but for now, it will be necessary to consider a second line of evidence concerning the effects of religious ways of seeing in the ancient world.

6.4.3.2. Reinterpreting Divine Imagery

My second argument about religious ways of seeing proceeds by way of analogy with a well-known literary phenomenon. Specifically, there is ample evidence to suggest that biblical authors often reinterpreted religious *literary* imagery in light of new theological perspectives. This point is hardly controversial and is documented in several areas of biblical scholarship. For instance, the study of intertextuality or inner-biblical exegesis seeks to understand the way in which a given text draws on explicit citations and latent allusions in other literature with the aim of not only preserving prior traditions but also transforming them.[231] This is especially evident when the Gospel writers reinterpret prophecies in light of the life and ministry of Jesus or when the New Testament letters leverage imagery associated with

[231] There is debate among biblical scholars about whether intertextuality and inner-biblical exegesis refer to the same phenomenon. Definitions of these terms vary, though it is sometimes suggested that intertextuality is a synchronic discipline while inner-biblical exegesis is more diachronic, with the latter focusing on how a historical author interprets or evokes an earlier text. While this distinction might prove helpful in some cases, there is nevertheless substantial overlap in these concepts.

Israel, the temple, priests, and so forth in order to describe the identify and function of the church.[232] The Hebrew Bible is also filled with intertextual references, many of which draw on either earlier biblical traditions or various ancient Near Eastern texts.[233] Furthermore, the Hebrew Bible itself can function as an intertext for a variety of different non-canonical writings from the Second Temple period and beyond.[234]

In all of these cases, intertextuality involves detaching ideas and imagery from their original literary settings and investing them with new meanings and explanations. While biblical scholars typically describe this phenomenon in terms of "rereading" or "reinterpreting," it also might be understood as a type of *repurposing* of religious imagery, albeit in textual form. In making these observations, I intend to draw a broad analogy between what is known to regularly happen in religious literature and what may possibly happen with respect to the visual arts. That is, if biblical authors could re-deploy literary texts in ways that go beyond their original meaning or intended purpose, then it is not unthinkable, and indeed hardly credulous, to posit that viewers could likewise imaginatively enter into the meaning-making process by interpreting existing artistic imagery in light of new theological perspectives.

A similar point can be made about portrayals of Yahweh. It is widely believed that the attributes, characteristics, and epithets associated with El and Baal in Northwest Semitic literature were assimilated into the repertoire of literary descriptions for Yahweh early in Israelite history. Like El, Yahweh is described in the Hebrew Bible as an elderly, bearded patriarch (Ps 102:28; Job 36:26; Isa 40:28) who is enthroned in the presence of the heavenly hosts / divine council (1 Kgs 22:19; Isa 6:1–8; Dan 7:9–14, 22), and who is thought to have a compassionate disposition toward humanity

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[232] See, for instance, Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); J. Ross Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul in Concert in the Letter to the Romans* (NovTSup 101; Leiden: Brill, 2002); Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders, eds., *Paul and the Scriptures of Israel* (JSNTSup 83; SSEJC 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993); Vernon K. Robbins, *The Invention of Christian Discourse* (Blandford Forum, Eng.: Deo, 2009).

[233] See, for instance, Rex A. Mason, "The Use of Earlier Biblical Material in Zechariah IX–XIV: A Study in Inter Biblical Exegesis" (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1973); Danna Nolan Fewell, eds., *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992); John S. Vassar, *Recalling a Story Once Told: An Intertextual Reading of the Psalter and the Pentateuch* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2007); and Christopher B. Hays, "Echoes of the Ancient Near East? Intertextuality and the Comparative Study of the Old Testament," in *The Word Leaps the Gap: Essays on Scripture and Theology in Honor of Richard B. Hays* (ed. J. Ross Wagner, C. Kavin Rowe, and A. Katherine Grieb; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 20–43.

[234] See, for instance, Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994).

(Exod 34:6; Ps 86:15).[235] Likewise, various attributes of Baal are also reinterpreted as applying to Yahweh, including his theophany in the storm (1 Sam 12:18; Psalm 29; Job 38:25–27), his role as a divine warrior (Pss 50:1–3; 97:1–6; 98:1–2; 104:1–4; Deut 33:2; Jud 4–5; Job 26:11–13), and his cosmic defeat of Leviathan, Yamm, and Mot (Pss 65:8 [Eng. 7]; 74:13–14; 89:10–11 [Eng. 9–10]; Job 3:8; 7:12; 26:11–13; 38:8, 10; Isa 11:15; 27:1; 51:9–10; etc.).

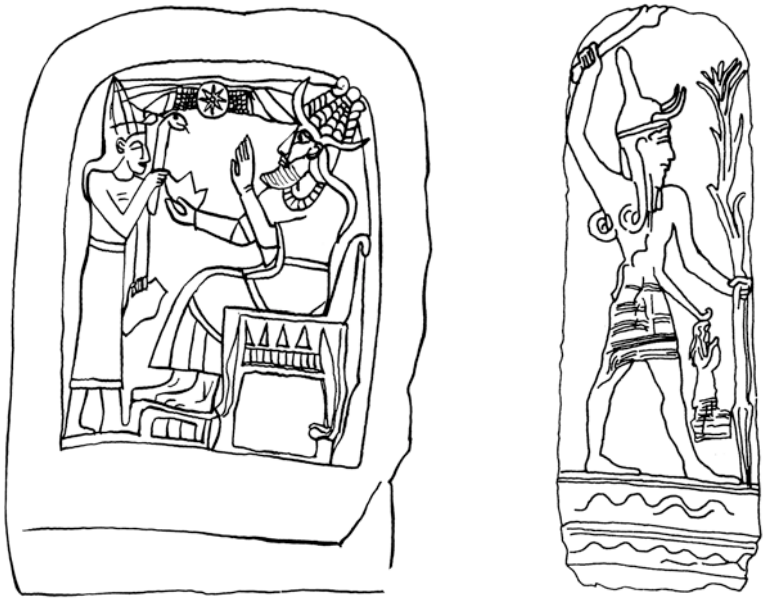
Many more examples could surely be cited with respect to El and Baal (as well as other deities), and biblical scholars generally agree that this evidence suggests a Canaanite background to Israelite religion. Yet, as was the case with intertexutality, these data can also potentially be applied to religious ways of seeing. Specifically, while there is a general continuity in divine imagery between LBA Canaanite religions and early forms of Yahwism, over the course of time this imagery came to be understood as referring to different deities. That is, while literary depictions of an elderly, enthroned deity or a smiting god of the storm were once intended to signify El and Baal, respectively, in the theological perspective of early Israel, they became divine portraits of Yahweh instead.

The attribution to Yahweh of titles and characteristics of Canaanite deities is no less an example of users repurposing religious imagery than is Christians missionaries giving the name "Francis of Assisi" to an indigenous tribal statue. In both cases, the new meaning that is infused into existing religious imagery adheres more closely to the theological beliefs of subsequent audiences than it does to the intentions of its original producers.[236] If I am right in drawing this analogy between the reinterpretation of literary descriptions of deities and the repurposing of artistic imagery, then it at least raises the possibility that Israelite viewers might have seen or recognized Yahweh in art objects that were originally intended to serve as images of El or Baal.

Consider, for instance, the deities represented on two flat stelae found near a temple site in LBA Ugarit (**figs. 6.19–20**). The figure on the left is bearded and seated upon a throne and the figure on the right is in a smiting pose with what appears to be a thunderbolt in his left hand. On iconographic grounds, these figures almost certainly represent El and Baal, respectively. However, if ancient Israelites *readers* came to understand Yahweh in light of literary descriptions of El and Baal, then it is also possible that ancient Israelite *viewers* may have come to see Yahweh in these two images

[235] For further discussion and references to Canaanite literature, see Smith, *The Early History of God*, 32–42.

[236] In this sense, it is also possible to talk about the "depurposing" of religious imagery, such as when the cross of Christ is used as a piece of jewelry or when Byzantine icons of saints are printed on fabrics used in collections by modern day fashion designers such as Dolce & Gabbana and Alexander McQueen.



Figures 6.19–20. Left: Bearded deity, most likely El, seated upon a throne, Ugarit, Late Bronze Age. After Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 124 fig. 6.4. Right: Standing deity in a smiting pose, most likely Baal, Ugarit, Late Bronze Age. After Mettinger *No Graven Image*, 124 fig. 6.5.

(or others like them). That is to say, any Israelite who was familiar with early literary descriptions of Yahweh might well have been inclined to recognize their deity in iconic images of El and Baal. In this way, an image such as **fig. 6.20** would constitute in the mind of the viewer a type of visual interpretation of Psalm 29 or Ps 68:4, both of which reapply textual materials once belonging to Baal to Yahweh.

Again, I want to stress that these images were by no means originally intended to depict Yahweh and that they were certainly seen as images of El and Baal by their original viewers in ancient Ugarit. Nevertheless, it is quite possible—if not very likely—that ancient Israelites would have been able to visualize Yahweh in the iconography of El and Baal precisely because many of the characteristics of El and Baal had already converged with *literary* descriptions of Yahweh in Israelite religion. If correct, this proposal would reframe what "counts" as credible evidence in the search for Yahweh's image. Rather than relying solely on iconographic and archaeological analysis, scholars would also need to consider how religious ways of seeing—and in particular, knowledge gleaned from literary depictions of Yahweh, or at least the mechanism of reinterpreting or repurposing religious imagery—might have led Israelite viewers to identify their deity in the characteristic iconography of other ANE gods.

6.4.3.3. Repurposing Art in Early Judaism

As I have noted throughout this section, it is difficult to find direct evidence of the effect of religious ways of seeing in ancient cultures. We do not have, for instance, an Iron Age IIC image of Baal that has been clearly re-inscribed with Yahweh's name where Baal's name was stood. And despite the interesting case of pithos A at Kuntillet ʿAjrud, we do not have unambiguous examples of non-Yahwistic art being re-interpreted as Yahweh in light of extant textual data. But neither must one rely solely on visual culture theory to make a case that religious ways of seeing were active in the ancient world and that they had some effect on how viewers interpreted and interacted with art objects.

More concrete evidence of the social, cultural, and religious constructions of seeing can be found in adjacent historical periods. For instance, Erwin Goodenough's previously mentioned study of early Jewish symbolism (§6.3.1) demonstrates that much of the imagery that was employed in Jewish synagogues and tombs during this time was borrowed and adapted from Greco-Roman (i.e., "pagan") artistic traditions. In fact, Goodenough argues that the visual vocabulary of early Judaism drew heavily upon common motifs in Greco-Roman art, including eagles, lions, masks, victory wreaths, trees, cupids, cornucopias, the centaur, the Seasons, zodiac signs, and so forth.

Goodenough insists that the use of this Greco-Roman inspired imagery in Jewish worship contexts was not merely for decorative or aesthetic purposes. Rather, Goodenough suggests that there was "a symbolic adaptation of pagan figures to Judaism," and later, to early Christianity as well.[237] In taking over common themes from Greco-Roman art, early Jewish communities "rejected the old explanations" given for these images and instead reinterpreted them in light of their own religious belief systems.[238] While Goodenough's research has been critiqued on numerous fronts (mostly having to do with his interpretation of specific symbols as well as his understanding of mystic Judaism), his reviewers have widely affirmed this central point.[239]

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[237] Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 4.27. In fact, Goodenough argues that one of things that enabled Jesus' teaching to be so quickly accommodated to the Hellenistic world was the presence of a form of non-rabbinic Judaism that relied upon imagery already well known in the Greco-Roman world.

[238] Ibid., 42.

[239] For instance, in his comprehensive review of *Jewish Symbols*, Morton Smith comments as follows: "Goodenough's supposition that the Jews gave their own interpretations to the symbols they borrowed is plausible and has been commonly accepted" ("Goodenough's Jewish Symbols in Retrospect," *JBL* 86 [1967]: 61). For an extensive list of reviews of Goodenough's study see Neusner, *Jewish Symbols*, xxxv–xxxvii.

Goodenough's hypothesis hinges on a subtle but important distinction between a symbol's connotative "value" on the one hand and its denotative "explanation" or interpretation on the other hand.[240] In Goodenough's estimation, the connotation of an image has to do with its underlying symbolic associations as well as its power to evoke certain feelings, emotions, ideas, or impressions that lie beyond the object's literal or primary meaning. In contrast, denotation refers to the precise explanation viewers give concerning what an image signifies (its external referent) or how its primary meaning is to be understood in a particular theological, cultural, and historical context. When a symbol or image migrates between religions or even from one context to another within the same religion it tends to keep its connotative values even as its original explanation is reinterpreted by subsequent users.[241]

In the case of Jews in the Greco-Roman period, Goodenough argues that the values associated with pagan symbols were intentionally adopted but, in order to remain faithful to Torah, new Jewish interpretations were imposed on these symbols. In light of this reinterpretation, or what I earlier referred to as "repurposing," Goodenough claims that the inclusion of Greco-Roman symbols in Jewish synagogues did not constitute "a real invasion of Hellenistic thought into common Jewish thinking."[242] In other words, the incorporation of pagan art within Jewish contexts was not, in Goodenough's view, a form of syncretism.[243]

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[240] Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 4.33. Goodenough sometimes uses the term "meaning" interchangeably with "value" or "power." However, he specifies that meaning refers strictly to an image's symbolic connotation, not its explanation.

[241] Ibid., 4.42.

[242] Ibid., 4.25.

[243] While I believe that Goodenough is correct to distinguish between syncretism and the repurposing of religious imagery, there might only be a fine line between these two phenomena. In fact, the Jewish symbolism that Goodenough talks about might be thought of as a "soft" form of syncretism insofar as it involves the incorporation of pagan elements into Jewish worship. Indeed, the use of such images in Jewish synagogues might have been regarded as objectionable—or even syncretistic—from the vantage point of certain strands of rabbinic Judaism. Nevertheless, I suspect that Goodenough would argue that what one encounters in Jewish synagogues of the Greco-Roman period was somewhat different—if only in degree and not in kind—from the worship practices on display in the Elephantine temple. The key difference seems to lie in the imposition of Jewish meanings on pagan objects, which effectively would render those symbols no longer truly pagan but Jewish. That is to say, when Jewish worshipers looked upon an image of Helios at Beit Alpha they did not, so Goodenough would argue, think that they were encountering a pagan god. Rather, they believed that they were seeing Yahweh—or at least a symbol of Yahweh's essence or character—through iconographic motifs that were once associated with Greco-Roman imagery.

Figure 6.21. Zodiac with Helios at the center, Beit Alpha (northern Israel), 6th c. C.E. After Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, fig. 640.

A brief example demonstrates the general trajectory of Goodenough's findings. Astronomical symbols constitute one of the most prominent themes in Greco-Roman religious art and seemed to have had a great impact on the symbolism found in early Jewish synagogues and tombs. In fact, one of the most prominent designs in Jewish religious art from the late Roman Empire through the Byzantine period is the circle of the zodiac with its twelve signs, at the center of which is Helios driving his four-horse chariot.[244] The zodiac is typically enclosed in a larger square that has a symbol of one of the Seasons in each of its corners. This design is best preserved in an ornate mosaic from Beit Alpha (**fig. 6.21**).[245]

In less well-preserved forms, zodiac-related imagery also appears in other Palestinian synagogues, including those at Yafa, Naaran, and Dura.[246] Other astral symbols such as the sun, moon, stars, and Seasons can likewise be found on Jewish synagogue ceilings, stone friezes, amulets, sarcophagi,

[244] Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 8.166.

[245] The fact that the Seasons are placed opposite the wrong astronomical signs indicates that the Jewish artists and their viewers were not primarily interested in this imagery for use in astrology (ibid., 8.168). For a list of further studies of the Beit Alpha mosaic see ibid., 1.248–51.

[246] For a review of some of these artifacts, see ibid., 8.169–71.

and catacombs.[247] Astral symbols were often juxtaposed alongside or blended with more traditional Jewish imagery, such as in the Dura synagogue, where the figure of Moses takes the place of Helios at the center of the zodiac. Another example comes from Beit Alpha, where the previously mentioned Helios/zodiac motif is positioned between panels that represent the Akedah sacrifice on the one side and various Jewish cult objects on the other. Many other examples can be adduced, but in each case, Goodenough contends that when Jewish communities adapted these Greco-Roman images for use in their synagogues and tombs, they gave them a new "Judaized" explanation that, in essence, obscured the original meaning of this imagery.[248] In other words, Jewish observers visualized their deity and other religiously meaningful content in symbols that were initially meant for a very different purpose.

In order to support this particular hypothesis, Goodenough analyzes early Jewish art and literature for evidence that Jewish communities repurposed Greco-Roman concepts. While space prohibits an extensive review of this data, a few examples are instructive. For instance, some Jewish charms mention "Helios on the Cherubim" and numerous paintings in Jewish catacombs utilize astral imagery, the zodiac, and the Seasons in ways that, in Goodenough's estimation, were combatable with Jewish thought.[249] In addition, there are Jewish amulets that have astral symbols on the obverse and have the label *Iaō* on the reverse. While it is not entirely clear how image and text correlate with one another in this latter case, Goodenough claims that these symbols "must be understood as being if not a representation of God for Jews at least a manifestation of Deity, a sign of Deity, and, because of the potency to which the amulets attest, a symbol of Deity."[250]

A similar type of conceptual fusion is also evident in many examples from the literature of Hellenized Judaism and early forms of Jewish mysticism.[251] Though in different ways, each of these literary sources keeps astral imagery alive, but attempts to repurpose its meaning. This often occurs through allegorical explanations that that attempt to square the presence of such imagery with the Torah. For example, the twelve signs of the zodiac become visual metaphors of the twelve stones in the high priest's breastplate or the twelve tribes of Israel; stars are understood to symbolize the righteous; the seven planets become reminders of the seven martyred Maccabean brothers; and the spring and fall Seasons are associated with the timing of the Jewish festivals.

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[247] Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 171–77.
[248] Ibid., 8.177.
[249] Ibid., 8.174.
[250] Ibid., 8.172.
[251] Ibid., 8.196–214.

The most vivid example once again involves the image of Helios within the zodiac. Within Greco-Roman religions, this imagery symbolized "the supremacy of the law of nature, the orderly cosmos, under the direction of Sol Invictus. . . . The astral system promised immortality, as the soul returned to its cosmic, or hypercosmic, origin."[252] When Jewish communities took over this imagery, they retained its general connotation regarding astral mysticism, celestial immortality, and the cosmic order. But, in a more specific sense, the image of Helios driving his chariot through the zodiac came to represent Yahweh, the cosmic deity of early Judaism.[253] Philo corroborates this view when he describes God as the shepherd of the flock of the stars or as a charioteer who controls the universe.[254] Goodenough sums up the matter in this way:

> The zodiac in the synagogues, with Helios in the center . . . seems to me to proclaim that the God worshiped in the synagogue was the God who had made the stars, and revealed himself through them in cosmic law and order and right, but who was himself the Charioteer guiding the universe and all its order and law.[255]

To put the matter in slightly different terms, one might say that in places of worship such as a synagogue, Jewish viewers would have been encouraged to see Helios imagery in light of orthodox, communitarian, or authoritarian covenants—that is, to trust that the image, though of non-Jewish origins, was an acceptable way of depicting certain aspects of Jewish faith, if not Yahweh himself.

To reiterate the point I have been trying to make throughout this whole section, Goodenough's conclusion is not a product of "anything goes" speculation or imaginative viewer (or reader) response criticism. Rather, Goodenough roots his conclusions about how viewers might have processed and responded to religious imagery in what we know to be true about the repurposing of textual imagery from early Jewish literary sources. In these cases, religious beliefs inform the hermeneutical perspective through which observers interpret imagery, whether in the form of verbal language or artistic symbols.

If religious ways of seeing could have this type of effect on early Jewish viewers, is it possible that the same might be true of earlier periods as well? An intriguing example comes in the form of a Persian period coin, which on one side features the inscription *yhd* in archaic Aramaic script above a

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[252] Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 8.214.
[253] Ibid., 4.37.
[254] Ibid., 8.215.
[255] Ibid., 8.215.

Figure 6.22. Silver drachma or quarter shekel, provenance unknown, Persian period. After Edelman, "Tracking Observance of the Aniconic Tradition," 225 fig. 2; cf. Meshorer, *Ancient Jewish Coinage*, 1.21 pl. 1.1.

bearded god, seated on a throne with wings and wheels, and holding a bird (perhaps an eagle) with his outstretched left hand (**fig. 6.22**).[256]

The precise identify of the seated deity is disputed, but the majority of scholars believe that it represents Zeus. On iconographic grounds, this argument is well supported since Zeus is often depicted as a bearded deity, seated on a throne, with an eagle on his hand and with an outer garment as seen in this image. However, since the coin was minted in Yehud, some scholars have suggested that this figure may actually represent Yahweh.[257] For instance, Diana V. Edelman, argues that the reason Yahweh ends up looking so Zeus-like is either because a Greek engraver made the die cast or because the Judahite artist consciously imitated the well-known imagery associated with Zeus.[258]

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[256] The other side of the coin features a bearded human head, facing right, with a crested helmet. For an analysis of this side of the coin see Diana V. Edelman, "Tracking Observance of the Aniconic Tradition Through Numismatics," in *The Triumph of Elohim*, 194–98.

[257] See, for instance, Ya'akov Meshorer, *Ancient Jewish Coinage* (2 vols; Dix Hills, N.Y.: Amphora Books, 1982), 1.25; Martin J. Price, *Coins and the Bible* (London: V. C. Vecchi & Sons, 1975), 10; Helmut Kienle, *Der Gott auf dem Flügelrad: Zu den ungelösten Fragen der "synkretistischen" Münze BMC Palestine S. 181, Nr. 29* (Göttinger Orientforschungen VI, 7; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1975), 68–74; Charles T. Seltman, *Greek Coins: A History of Metallic Currency and Coinage Down to the Fall of the Hellenistic Kingdoms* (2d ed.; Methuen's Handbooks of Archaeology; London: Methuen & Co., 1965), 154; and Arthur Bernard Cook, *Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion* (2 vols; New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1964 [1914]), 1.232–7.

[258] Edelman, "Tracking Observance," 193.

Perhaps so, but the simpler explanation is that the figure looks so Zeus-like because it was actually meant to depict Zeus in the first place! Yet, even if this were the case, it is still possible that at least some ancient viewers might have recognized Yahweh in this image, especially in light of the preceding discussion concerning the repurposing of art in the Greco-Roman period. This suggestion gains credence from the fact that magical texts from the Hellenistic era equate Yahweh with Zeus much like Jewish charms equate Yahweh with Helios.[259] Likewise, Arthur Cook discusses an onyx of unknown provenance that features a beardless Zeus, enthroned with a scepter, thunderbolt, and eagle, with the inscription *IAW SABAW* on its reverse.[260] And perhaps more to the point for devout Jewish viewers, the imagery on this coin—especially its winged and wheeled throne—might have been interpreted in light of the visions of Yahweh's mobile throne found in Ezekiel 1 and 10.

Thus, as was the case in early Jewish synagogues, it once again seems all but certain that conclusions about whether or not ancient viewers encountered Yahweh in the visual arts cannot be based solely on art historical or iconographic considerations. Or at least when they are, the iconographic analysis needed to prove this point is not entirely convincing.[261] In contrast, a visual culture perspective reminds us that a Jewish observer would not have looked upon this coin as a highly trained art historian but rather as a devout worshiper who might well have been inclined to recognize Yahweh within the familiar contours of a bearded deity who sits upon a winged throne.

6.4.4. Assessment

Throughout this section, I have evaluated how a visual culture approach might come to bear on the on-going search for Yahweh's image. While it is difficult to recover direct evidence of the effects of religious ways of seeing in the ancient world, the three arguments I developed above strongly suggest that Israelites viewers may well have repurposed religious imagery in light of their underlying religious knowledge and beliefs. As a result, it is necessary to reconsider how ancient viewers might have come to look for or visualize Yahweh in images that were not originally intended to depict their deity.

In making this case, I am essentially arguing that what Morgan has shown to be true about the effects of religious ways of seeing on contempo-

[259] Edelman, "Tracking Observance," 191.

[260] Cook, *Zeus*, 1.232–7.

[261] This is especially true of Schmidt's explanation of Bes imagery from Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Edelman's explanation of the Zeus-like quality of Yahweh's image on the Persian period coin.

rary Christian communities was also true of ancient Israelite religion. In both contexts, certain gazes or image covenants might have been in place that would have led viewers to recognize things in an image that others fail to perceive.

In Morgan's previously mentioned study, some Lutheran and Catholic observers claimed to see hidden religious symbols in Sallman's *Head of Christ,* even though the author himself did not intend to depict such objects. In Morgan's estimation, Sallman's painting becomes textualized insofar as it is inserted "into a mode of discourse built on the primary language of the Bible."[262] In other words, viewers read images in light of their knowledge of texts and theological traditions.

As I suggest throughout this section, a similar process might have taken place in the ancient world. Though it is sometimes difficult to establish who had access to biblical texts and when their current literary form was finalized, it is plausible that ancient Israelites, especially after the exile, were at least somewhat familiar with figurative descriptions of Yahweh as a divine warrior, an armed archer, a lion, a bull, a luminous presence, and so forth. In light of Morgan's theory about religious ways of seeing (not to mention Mitchell's theory about the image-text dialectic), it is possible that this knowledge conditioned how Israelite viewers interpreted visual objects that depicted warriors, archers, lions, bulls, solar objects, and so forth. In other words, knowledge of divine metaphors (whether from the Hebrew Bible, pre-biblical sources, or oral traditions) might have come to shape visual experience.

6.5. Religious Visual Culture and Biblical Studies

I bring this chapter to a close by once again returning to the central interest of this study as a whole: visual hermeneutics. Specifically, how does the study of religious visual culture potentially intersect with methods of biblical research?

I have demonstrated that a visual culture approach might reframe two closely related topics in religio-historical research: the study of Israelite aniconism and the search for Yahweh's image. These two cases studies certainly do not exhaust the range of possible applications of religious visual culture to biblical studies. Instead, these reflections are intended to initiate a longer and more detailed conversation about the role and function of visual culture in the study of Israelite religion. While scholars who take up this discussion will likely address a diverse set of questions, future research in this area will be characterized by several persistent concerns.

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[262] Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 140.

First, an approach to religio-historical research that is more informed by the study of religious visual culture will increasingly shift from an artist- and object-oriented discourse to a practice-centered discourse. The study of ancient visual practices could take a variety of different forms. In addition to further addressing some of the issues I have already raised about Israelite aniconism, scholars also might take a cue from Morgan by developing a functional typology of image use in the Hebrew Bible, a project which would nicely complement many of the already available surveys of image content in Syria-Palestine.

Alternatively, biblical scholars might follow the lead of journals such as *Material Religion* by focusing more explicitly on the social function and effect of religious visual culture, including how visual data and visual practices work together to structure and mediate religious experiences. Or biblical scholars might more closely scrutinize a broader range of visual practices and experiences including: visions, theophanies, divination, symbolic acts by the prophets, detailed descriptions of worship spaces (i.e., the tabernacle and temple), the use of material objects to mark important times and places, and the ritual destruction of rival images in moments of cultic reform. Taking up these and any number of other topics related to visual practices would prompt biblical scholars to address more fully questions about the role of the visual medium of belief in the matter of Israelite religion.

Second, a visual culture approach would also prompt biblical scholars to attend more closely to the role of the viewer in the meaning-making process. This shift in focus, which is common among visual culture theorists, might be understood to parallel the recent increase of interest in the role of the reader within literary approaches to biblical interpretation. However, in making this suggestion I do not mean to imply that issues related to an image's provenance, mode of production, iconographic style, symbolic meaning, or intended function should be downplayed. Indeed, these matters are absolutely essential and thus should not be abandoned.

Nevertheless, interest in an object's original production need not preclude a concern for its subsequent reception. For instance, biblical scholars might analyze specific cases in which ancient viewers repurposed religious imagery in light of new religio-historical contexts. Or more generally, biblical scholars might consider how different viewing contexts—be it a certain time period, a specific religious setting, or a particular social location (gender, class, etc.)—might have influenced how ancient Israelites processed or responded to visual data.

In both of these cases, a more detailed understanding of ancient Israelite religious experience might be gained by focusing not only on the historical context surrounding an image's original production but also on the historical circumstances, influences, and ideas that inform an image's on-going reception. This argument would have to be worked out on a case-by-case

basis, and in this regard, I hope that the reflections offered in this chapter provide a helpful starting point, not a conclusion, for further studies in iconographic exegesis.

Chapter 7

Conclusion:
Principles for a Visual Hermeneutics

"It has rightly been said that theory, if not received at the door of an empirical discipline, comes in through the chimney like a ghost and upsets the furniture."[1]

"He who leaves the old way for the new knows what he leaves,
but does not know what he will find."[2]

7.1. A Case for Theory, Revisited

In recent years, it has become somewhat customary for books in religious studies and other areas of the humanities to begin with a brief chapter outlining the theory that underlies the study as a whole. This book exhibits a similar interest in theory, though it ups the ante considerably since the entire study—not just the opening chapter—considers the preliminary questions and epistemological rationale (i.e., theory) upon which iconographic exegesis is based. Is this lengthy treatment of theory *really* necessary? Why not just get to work on analyzing ancient art and interpreting biblical literature? What is the point of spending so much time engaging the work of Nelson Goodman, David Freedberg, Alfred Gell, W. J. T. Mitchell, David Morgan, and Zainab Bahrani when the "real" work of iconographic exegesis is being done by scholars in and beyond the Fribourg School?

As a way of responding to these and related questions, it is worth once again reiterating why such a lengthy foray into visual hermeneutics is needed. At the most basic level, this need emerges from a rather straightforward observation about a gap in the scholarly literature of iconographic

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[1] Erwin Panofsky, "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (ed. Panofsky; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1955), 22.

[2] As my family remembers it, my great grandfather, Antonio Giangiacomo, frequently spoke this proverb in his native Abruzzo dialect: *Che lascia la via vecchia e prende la nuova sa che lascia ma no sa che trova*.

exegesis. As noted in the introduction (§1.1), an increasing number of scholars are now turning to ancient art as a primary source for studying the Bible and the biblical world but few have given attention to questions pertaining to the nature of visual culture and, with it, critical theories about visual representation, the image-text relationship, the implications of visual response, and the importance of religious ways of seeing and visual practices. In light of this situation, this study aims to: (1) offer a sustained engagement of visual theory that directly addresses issues relevant to methods and practices of iconographic exegesis; and (2) synthesize these theoretical reflections into a set of clearly delineated interpretive principles that, when taken together, constitute a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies (§7.2).

In this sense, I chart a different course than many other contributors to the field of iconographic exegesis. Instead of trying to solve a specific problem in biblical interpretation, I critically assess the tacit assumptions that inform how scholars utilize, interpret, and relate ancient visual and verbal data in a wide variety of research endeavors. These reflections are designed not only to refine interpretive approaches within the emerging field of iconographic exegesis but also to raise new questions and issues about the intersection of biblical interpretation, art historical analysis, archaeology, and religio-historical research.

Yet, even though there is a need for closer scrutiny of theory in the specific case of iconographic exegesis, at least some scholars might remain skeptical about the place of such reflection in biblical scholarship and/or religio-historical research more broadly. And perhaps for good reason. Theoretical reflection often functions as a self-contained, abstract intellectual exercise. Its primary purpose, so it seems, is to problematize and/or deconstruct meaning-making in the areas of textual, visual, and historical analysis. While this approach to theory might help to destabilize certain problematic assumptions in scholarship, it often fails to offer constructive proposals or alternative methods. Many biblical scholars and historians of religion have thus been slow to welcome this approach. Studies that do theory for theory's sake can be tedious, if not altogether tangential, when it comes to illuminating biblical meaning, enriching theological reflection, or clarifying the historical development of Israelite religion.

My own approach to theory strives to be more constructive in its aims. At every point possible, I endeavor to avoid a type of "theory-wonking" in which critical reflection is disconnected from practical analysis and concrete examples.[3] Nevertheless, I empathize with those readers who still

[3] I borrow the term "theory-wonking" from David Morgan, who is also suspicious of projects that pursue theory for its own sake (*Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* [New York: Routledge, 2010], 12). For further discussion, see Morgan's cautionary remarks about the role of theory in religious visual culture research in *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 25–27.

might be wary of (or wearied by) my insistence on the need for theory. Rather than dismissing these concerns, I want to invite and encourage a healthy dose of skepticism about why theory is necessary and how it works. That is to say, I think theory is most helpful in biblical scholarship (or any other discipline) when it, too, is closely scrutinized—that is, when its pitfalls are honestly acknowledged and its practical applications are plainly delineated. Thus, in the remainder of this section, I briefly respond to three possible objections concerning the use of theory in biblical scholarship and religio-historical research. While not exhaustive in scope, I hope that these remarks further reinforce why this sustained reflection on visual hermeneutics was worth reading—or, for those who have skipped to this point from the introduction, why it might be beneficial to read chapters 2–6 in the first place.

One of the more common objections about theory is not so much that it is an unnecessary endeavor but that it can end up playing too central of a role in a given study. A senior New Testament scholar once put it this way: "Theory should be everywhere operative, but seldom explicit." The reasoning here seems to be that theory is best treated as an implicit conversation partner, tacitly assumed and occasionally gestured toward but ultimately left in the background of both academic research and classroom teaching.

To a certain extent, I agree. Not every biblical scholar or ancient Near Eastern art historian needs to wear visual theory on her sleeves. And for practical reasons, it might be advisable for most journal articles or chapter-length contributions to leave aside lengthy theoretical reflection in favor of more direct and straightforward exegetical and art-historical analyses. Nevertheless, for theory to be of any use in the background of a particular study, it must at some point be dealt with in the foreground of that field's scholarly literature. The prominent art historian Erwin Panofsky makes this very point when he comments that "theory, if not received at the door of an empirical discipline, comes in through the chimney like a ghost and upsets the furniture."[4]

Panofsky's imagery provides a helpful metaphor—or metapicture, to use Mitchell's term—for why theoretical reflection is so essential. Theory *is* everywhere operative. The only question is, how will it be greeted by fields such as biblical studies, archaeology, ANE art history, and so forth? Whatever the discipline might be, visual theory can make quite a mess of the methodological furniture if left in the background too long. This is why I have attempted to engage visual theory more directly. To press Panofsky's metapicture further, my research aims to encourage other scholars to greet visual theory at the threshold of their own research projects.

What, then, would constitute a meaningful greeting? These encounters with theory need not be exhaustive or even extensive. But they would entail

[4] Panofsky, "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline," 22.

a thoughtful and self-critical reflection about the epistemological rationale upon which interpretive methods are based. Although there is no one single way to "do" theory, Panofsky once again provides a guiding metaphor. In his *Studies in Iconology*, Panofsky famously illustrates the three stages of his iconographic method by analyzing a simple scene in which two gentlemen greet one another in the street by removing their hats.[5] To my knowledge, Panofsky never intended to connect the primal scene of his methodological schema to the metaphor he employs to describe the importance of theory. Yet, it is hard to miss the fact that, in both cases, Panofsky relies on the imagery of a greeting.

This correspondence is potentially instructive. If methods are thought of as interpretive "hats" that scholars wear when analyzing biblical texts, then theoretical reflection might well be conceived of as a type of hat-removing gesture. That is to say, theoretical reflection not only involves greeting theory at the door but it also entails lifting one's hat to examine more closely the heads (or brains) upon which certain interpretive procedures rest. By employing this gesture of greeting in their academic research, biblical scholars would generate a greater awareness of their intellectual presuppositions and underlying perspectives. Seen in this light, theoretical reflection is not inherently an abstract or deconstructive endeavor. Rather, it can be an expression of intellectual curiosity, or perhaps better yet, interdisciplinary hospitality. In either case, the goal of my project is to stage a greeting with visual theory, and in so doing, to prompt other scholars interested in religious antiquity to be more willing to doff their own caps when it comes to reading images and seeing texts.

A second major concern about theory—and visual theory in particular—is that it threatens to become, as Jacques Derrida might put it, a "dangerous supplement" to other fields of study.[6] Mitchell appropriates Derrida's notion of the dangerous supplement to describe the skepticism and defensive-

[5] Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1972 [1939]), esp. 3–17. Panofsky describes three aspects of this scene, each of which corresponds to one of the levels of meaning in his iconographic method: (1) the formal features of this scene, including the configuration of the figures and the hat-removing movement (pre-iconographic level); (2) its conventional subject matter of polite greeting (iconographic level); and (3) the underlying national, social, and cultural beliefs that give symbolic meaning and value to this gesture (the iconological level).

[6] In *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida uses this term to refer to the phenomenon of writing, which as Derrida sees it, threatens to infiltrate or breech (*entamer*) the domain of speech, replacing the authentic presence of the voice with an endless series of repetitions, recitations, and deferrals. For further discussion, see Jacques Derrida, "The Dangerous Supplement," in *Of Grammatology* (trans. Gayatri Spivak; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978 [1967]), 141–64.

ness that visual theory tends to provoke in other fields.[7] When scholars outside of the fine arts raise questions about what images are and how they function they can easily be seen as venturing into—or perhaps invading—territory that has traditionally been patrolled by art historians and philosophers. Furthermore, the insights of visual theory can also apply pressure to the stability of traditional disciplinary boundaries, especially when they seem to rely on sharp distinctions between image and text.[8]

I suspect that at least some biblical scholars might see visual theory as a dangerous supplement to their own field of study—and perhaps for very similar reasons. For instance, there sometimes seems to be a concern that it is anachronistic (and thus dangerous) to apply contemporary visual theory to historical-critical research. In this view, applying contemporary theories about visual culture to the ANE world is thought to constitute a type of temporal breech or intrusion of modern epistemologies into the study of ancient visual materials and practices. Such objections might not only be leveled against this study but also any other project that draws on recent theory in order to better understand ancient materials. Zainab Bahrani anticipates this objection to her own research. In defense of her application of semiotic theory to the analysis of Mesopotamian art, Bahrani rightly notes that all scholarship is unavoidably dependent on contemporary epistemologies and theoretical frameworks. She argues, "Many studies that are purported to be traditional or 'non-theoretical' simply continue to rely upon theories originally put forth by [earlier] scholars."[9]

This perspective applies especially well to the iconographic method. Even though Panofsky's schema is widely accepted as the *de facto* method of visual analysis in iconographic exegesis (not to mention a variety of other fields), it represents an approach to interpreting ancient art that is no less theoretical—and, indeed, no less anachronistic—than a semiotic one. As was already discussed (§4.1), Panofsky's interpretive perspective was itself heavily influenced by the theory of its day—namely, a philological model of German literary criticism that was prominent in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. On the other side of the equation, textual evidence from the ANE world implies that ancient viewers, by convention and habit, sometimes analyzed images according to an intellectual tradition that might share more in common with modern day semiotics than it does with "traditional" iconographic perspectives (cf. §4.3.4). In this sense, visual theory can provide conceptual frameworks that enable scholars to describe more clearly certain ancient practices and beliefs. Thus, if visual theory is

[7] W. J. T. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture," *Journal of Visual Culture* (2002): 165–81.

[8] Ibid., 167.

[9] Zainab Bahrani, *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia* (New York: Routledge, 2001], 141–42.

in any way "dangerous," it is primarily because it threatens to reveal the limitations of more traditional approaches to iconographic exegesis.

Third, the integration of visual theory into biblical studies or other text-based fields can also be seen as an unwanted threat insofar as it potentially raises anxieties about disciplinary boundaries. At academic conferences, should theory-oriented approaches to ancient art be included in program units associated with ANE iconography or religious visual culture? Within graduate programs and theological education, should the study of images be integrated into more traditional courses (e.g., Introduction to the Hebrew Bible, Methods of Biblical Exegesis, Israelite Religion, etc.) or should it be framed as its own subject and perhaps co-taught with scholars from the departments of Art History, Visual Studies, and/or Ancient Near Eastern Languages and Culture? In terms of institutional decisions about hiring faculty and organizing departments, where do biblical scholars interested in visual culture best fit, or, conversely, where do visual theorists interested in ancient images or texts find a home?

These questions can raise a variety of practical and pedagogical concerns, and, in my estimation, a solution is not to be found in completely doing away with traditional disciplinary boundaries.[10] Nevertheless, an intentional movement toward interdisciplinarity in the areas of biblical studies, ANE art history, archaeology, and visual culture theory can foster the type of creativity and collaboration that will lead to new and fruitful insights. To be sure, these disciplinary "border crossings" must be approached in careful and conscientious ways. Scholars in all of these fields must be ever mindful of the need to build accessible and helpful bridges between the realm of theory and the practice of literary, visual, and historical analysis.

Theory-oriented research can also come under fire for promising more than it can deliver. Many studies that purport to offer "a theory of X" tend to be rather eclectic when it comes to which theorists they discuss and which issues they engage. Almost without exception, such studies neither cover the topic at hand in an exhaustive manner nor provide a coherent epistemological framework for *all* future work. This project is no exception. Indeed, there are a number of visual theorists that I could have chosen to engage other than Mitchell, Goodman, Freedberg, Gell, and Morgan.[11] Fur-

[10] In his discussion of similar issues, Mitchell perceives certain political issues lurking behind these questions. He speculates that the idea of incorporating visual theory into other fields can provoke "defensive postures and territorial anxieties . . . in the bureaucratic battlegrounds of academic institutions" ("Showing Seeing," 169). While Mitchell might be right to a certain extent, I think that there is good reason to believe that since the turn of the century, creative, cross-disciplinary research has gained greater acceptance in the humanities and social sciences.

[11] Other theorists are cited in footnotes throughout this study but could have been given more of a starring role. Some of these include: Umberto Eco, Norman Bryson, Michael

thermore, anyone who expects to find in this book a *fully* explanatory theory of ancient visual culture will surely be disappointed. Yet from the outset, my goal has not been to provide an all-encompassing master theory for the use of images in biblical studies. Rather, I have attempted to introduce the most pressing questions and debates of visual theory to scholars interested in biblical texts and ancient art. In addition, I have tried to probe some of the most salient problems and possibilities of applying contemporary visual theories to ancient cultures. In each of these ways, I have endeavored to make the emerging field of iconographic exegesis more *difficult*—that is, more aware of its presuppositions, more self-critical about its methods, and more interdisciplinary in its aims and conclusions.

Toward this end, I have raised a series of critical questions throughout this study about visual hermeneutics and how it relates to biblical interpretation and other areas of religio-historical research. These inquiries have included: What is visual literacy and how does this concept clarify the importance of images as a language of communication in the ancient world? (ch. 2); How have scholars conceptualized the nature of the image-text relationship and in what ways do these theories inform the interpretation of objects that combine visual and verbal data? (ch. 3); How do linguistic and non-linguistic signs convey meaning in different ways and what are the implications for methods of visual analysis? (ch. 4); How does the history and theory of visual response shed new light on the nature, power, and agency of ancient art objects? (ch. 5); and How might a consideration of visual practices and ways of seeing influence understandings of important topics in Israelite religion, including the study of Israelite aniconism and the search for Yahweh's image? (ch. 6).

Admittedly, at the outset of my research I did not know exactly what sort of answers I might find to these questions. At many points along the way, I have been far more certain of what sort of scholarship I was leaving behind than what new path I would discover. In this sense, the words of the Italian proverb cited in the epigraph to this chapter—*He who leaves the old way for the new knows what he leaves, but does not know what he will find*—deeply resonate with my experience trying to explore how certain theories might be integrated into a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies.

When my great grandfather, Antonio Giangiacomo, uttered the words of the above mentioned proverb he most likely would have had in mind his own experience as an Italian immigrant in the early-twentieth century. The eldest son of relatively poor Italian farmers, Antonio left his native town of Fresagrandinaria (in the Abruzzo region, just off the Adriatic coast) to move to America in 1922. Though he left behind a familiar land and a large

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Baxandall, James Elkins, Michael Ann Holly, Keith Moxey, Roland Barthes, Charles Sanders Peirce, Jonathan Culler, Julia Kristeva, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Gillian Rose, Lisa Cartwright, Marita Sturken, William Arweck, and Elisabeth Keenan.

family (including his wife and five children, who would not be able to join him until several years later) he hoped to find a new and more abundant life in the States. Though the analogy here is merely suggestive, my great grandfather's words, and perhaps more so his life experience, provide something of an orienting perspective to my own work with theory. And so maybe the best case I can make for theory is this: I remain hopeful that what is gained by entering the world of visual theory will ultimately far outweigh the risks and uncertainties of leaving the more familiar path of traditional work in biblical studies. Whether or not this is the case hinges, at least in part, on how the above reflections on visual theory can be distilled into specific principles that guide and inform how images are used in a field long dominated by its interest in texts.

7.2. Hermeneutical Principles for Method and Practice

As a way of synthesizing the reflections on visual theory found in chapters 2–6, I offer in this section a set of clearly delineated interpretive principles. For each principle, I briefly recapitulate its underlying theory as well as its most salient implications for method and practice. I envision these principles functioning less as a set of rules or a series of step-by-step procedures and more as an orienting framework that can inform the questions scholars ask and issues they raise when interpreting the Bible or aspects of Israelite religion in light of ancient art. Or to put the matter in more visual terms, if theory is a way of looking at, viewing, or contemplating a given topic, then the hermeneutical perspectives it generates might be thought of as an *art of understanding*. As with much art, certain aspects of this visual hermeneutics will not appeal to every scholar in the same way or to the same extent. Nevertheless, iconographic exegesis—and the field of biblical studies as a whole—can neither sidestep the following issues nor treat visual theory as a matter of secondary importance. Instead, by addressing this orienting framework head-on, biblical scholars and others interested in ancient art and religion will be challenged to further revise, and in certain cases redirect, how they go about reading images and seeing texts.

Taken together, these nine interpretive principles outline a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies:

(1) Because images were a vital component of ancient symbol systems, they should be seen as an indispensable resource for studying the historical and conceptual background of the biblical world (ch. 2);

(2) As the most widely utilized vehicle of communication in the ancient world, images can be described as a type of language and their importance can be characterized in terms of visual literacy (ch. 2);

(3) When examining the relationship between ancient art and the Bible (or any other set of visual and verbal data), researchers should clarify how they approach three interrelated but distinct comparative issues: image-text congruence, correlation, and contiguity (ch. 3);

(4) By conceptualizing the image-text relationship in terms of dialectical tensions and metapictures, scholars can more precisely describe the nature of visual-verbal interactions in both the modern and ancient world (ch. 3);

(5) Unlike linguistic signs, images function as a dense or replete notational system, and as such, they should be understood according to somewhat different semiotic principles than most written languages (ch. 4);

(6) Scholars should analyze ancient art beyond the level of iconography by considering how aspects of compositional design, rhetoric of display, and mode of signification contribute to what (and how) an image means (ch. 4);

(7) Since viewers often treat images as if they were living things, scholars should carefully attend to the nature, power, and agency of ancient art objects as well as the patterns and implications of visual responses to them (ch. 5);

(8) When studying Israelite religion, biblical scholars should focus not only on specific images and their iconographic content but also on what people do with images—that is, the practices that rely on and employ material objects as the visual medium of belief (ch. 6); and

(9) Because vision is deeply informed by underlying beliefs, values, and knowledge, it is important to consider the effects of the religious apparatus of sight on how ancient viewers might have processed and interpreted visual data (ch. 6).

7.2.1. The Importance of Images

The first principle is perhaps the most basic, and yet also the most imperative: *Because images were a vital component of ancient symbol systems, they should be seen as an indispensable resource for studying the historical and conceptual background of the biblical world.* This principle recognizes that while ancient visual materials were occasionally used for decorative purposes or aesthetic contemplation, they also had the capacity to convey complex ideas and messages, whether religious or otherwise (§2.1). In light of their widespread use in administrative, political, royal, and cultic settings,

it is possible to conclude that images, no less than texts, participated in the meaningful exchange of various forms of cultural knowledge. Thus construed, ancient iconography offers a data set that is at least as valuable as written materials when it comes to understanding the conceptual background of the biblical world. This hermeneutical perspective is summed up poignantly by Keel and Uehlinger when they suggest: "Anyone who systematically ignores the pictorial evidence that a culture has produced can hardly expect to recreate even a minimally adequate description of the culture itself."[12]

In my estimation, biblical scholars should receive this interpretive principle as a type of "altar call" to the study of images. At a practical level, heeding this call would redirect traditional approaches to biblical studies in at least two ways. First, if ancient images routinely conveyed religious ideas and other forms of cultural knowledge, then contemporary scholars should increasingly call into question text-alone approaches to the study of the Bible. In light of the evidence presented in chapter two of this study, it is no longer tenable to *a priori* assume that the Bible is best understood in light of other written documents or epigraphic remains regardless of their geographical and chronological proximity to the Bible's original authors and readers (§2.2). In many cases, images from the Levant will provide the most relevant comparative data set for interpreting the language of the Bible and its historical and conceptual background.

Second, since images themselves constitute a coherent, culturally conditioned symbol system, biblical scholars should examine ancient iconography on its own terms (§2.4). This would entail bringing a full array of analytical tools to bear on the study of images, including well-established art-historical principles, careful archaeological evaluation, and thoughtful reflection on visual theory. In addition, biblical scholars should strive to situate their studies with respect to larger iconographic and literary contexts, being careful not to use small fragments of visual data to illustrate an isolated biblical verse in a simplistic fashion. In this sense, when relating biblical texts to ancient art, scholars should employ careful, independent analyses of both visual and verbal data sets, recognizing that these two forms of media can function as dual reflexes of the same (or similar) underlying concepts. Among other things, this hermeneutical perspective underscores the need for biblical scholars to intentionally pursue training in the area of visual analysis and visual culture studies along with more traditional preparation in Semitic languages, historical criticism, literary analysis, and so forth. To put the matter plainly, if images played a meaningful role in the symbol system used by ancient Israelites and the early Church, then they

[12] Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (trans. Thomas H. Trapp; Minneapolis, Fortress, 1998 [German original: 1992]), 11.

should also play a meaningful role in the training, methods, and research agendas of contemporary biblical scholars.

The second principle emerges from the first, but makes even more explicit how and why images mattered to ancient viewers: *As the most widely utilized vehicle of communication in the ancient world, images can be described as a type of language and their importance can be characterized in terms of visual literacy.* Since the inception of the Fribourg School, studies in iconographic exegesis have highlighted the communicative capacity of ancient art (§2.3; §4.1). This is especially true of seals, coins, and other types of minor art, which as a form of mobile media, were able to circulate messages across vast territories and to diverse audiences (§2.3.2). Not only do these types of images far outnumber textual remains in the archaeological record, but even on objects with both visual and verbal elements, artists and users routinely privileged the presentation of iconographic forms over epigraphic data (§2.3.3.1). Thus, whether it is within the same cultural context or even on the same artifact, images often functioned as the preferred language of communication in the ancient world.

This conclusion is further strengthened by recent research on textual literacy rates in ancient Israel (§2.2). Though not without some debate, the majority of scholars suggest that no more than 10–15% of the general population would have possessed the ability to read or write with any degree of sophistication. In light of this datum, it is almost impossible to conclude that written materials were the only—or even the primary—way in which the vast majority of Israelites conveyed or received information. Rather, visual materials mattered more, and to more people, as a viable means of communication (§2.3.4). Even those who possessed the ability to read and write likely relied on images as a type of a *lingua franca* that could augment, or at times replace, written language (§2.3.3.2). If so, then it is reasonable to hypothesize that levels or rates of visual literacy—that is, the ability to read and process iconographic data with some degree of competency—far outstripped textual literacy in most levels of Israelite society.

What is the payoff of talking about ancient art in terms of language and literacy? On the one hand, conceptualizing images as a type of language provides a discursive framework in which concepts and terminology from the domain of written texts can be mapped onto the domain of artistic representation. This would enable biblical scholars not only to talk about visual interpretation in terms of "reading images" but also to describe distinct regional styles as "visual dialects" or complex compositions as having "pictorial syntax." While it might go too far to refer to the iconography of ANE minor art as a type of Semitic language, it is certainly the case that visual and verbal data closely interacted with one another within the broader symbol system of ancient Near Eastern cultures. Therefore, biblical scholars can develop more sophisticated ways of describing the complex interaction, or "inter-mediality," that can arise between visual and verbal languages in

the ancient world (§2.3.2).[13] In this regard, it would be helpful to talk about the literary imagery in the Bible as a textual medium through which biblical authors interpreted the languages of ancient art.

In addition, if images constitute a visual language, then biblical scholars must also closely examine the extent to which viewers were able to process, or read, this language (§2.3.1). Though levels or rates of visual literacy likely varied among different viewers in the ancient world (and for that matter, the modern world), it seems likely that visual literacy would have been a "majority phenomenon" in ancient Israel (§2.3.2).[14] This conclusion calls into question methods in iconographic exegesis, such as Keel's "concentric circles" approach, in which visual data is only consulted after exhausting relevant textual data (§2.4).[15] Even if this methodology provides a helpful way of organizing certain research projects, it is not necessarily the case that the vast majority of ancient Israelites would have turned to visual materials only *after* their knowledge of textual sources was exhausted. Or to put the matter differently, the average Israelite would have quickly turned to visual materials since their ability to read texts was so limited.

In sum, if visual literacy was a majority phenomenon in ancient Israel, and if the images on minor art functioned as a widespread language of communication throughout the Levant, then it follows that the comparative study of ancient iconography should be one of the inner-most "concentric circles" of contemporary biblical research.

7.2.2. The Image-Text Relationship

In its most basic definition, iconographic exegesis seeks to explore the relationship between ancient art and literary imagery in the Bible. However, in past research the precise nature of this relationship has been somewhat neglected, or at least has been dealt with in ways that are methodologically diffuse and/or conceptually disconnected (§3.1). My third exegetical principle addresses this situation: *When examining the relationship between ancient art and the Bible (or any other set of visual and verbal data),*

[13] See principles 3 and 4 below for further discussion about hermeneutical perspectives on the image-text relationship.

[14] As noted in chapter 2, I primarily discuss visual literacy in terms of the ability to read images, not create them. In all probability, the active production of images depended on specialists as much as—or even more than—the active production of texts.

[15] It should be noted, however, that while Keel introduces this concentric circle model in his commentary on the Song of Songs, he does not strictly follow this methodology in his other studies. However, other biblical scholars have more or less appropriated this approach. See, for instance, Joel M. LeMon, "Iconographic Approaches: The Iconic Structure of Psalm 17," in *Method Matters* (ed. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards; SBLRBS 56; Boston: Brill, 2010), 150–51.

scholars should clarify how they approach three interrelated but distinct comparative issues: image-text congruence, correlation, and contiguity.

These issues reflect different ways one can conceptualize what it means for an image and text to be related, and, as such, each seeks to answer a different type of question about the nature of the image-text relationship. For instance, when pursuing the issue of image-text congruence, scholars should attempt to establish the extent to which certain images and texts can be said to share similar themes, motifs, or subject matter (§3.2.1). Alternatively, image-text correlation seeks to explain the type and direction of interaction that obtains between a given image and text (§3.2.2). Finally, image-text contiguity raises important questions about the nature of comparative methodologies, including whether historical lines of influence and/or mechanisms of contact need to be present in order for scholars to compare visual and verbal data sets (§3.2.3). Although each of these issues is somewhat discrete, they are not unrelated to one another. If congruence indicates *which* images and texts are related in the first place, then correlation and contiguity seek to explain, respectively, *how* and *why* those specific images and texts are related to one another.

By delineating these issues and showing how they are conceptually related, this typology of image-text approaches contributes to a visual hermeneutics at two levels (§3.2.4). First, it provides a heuristic device that can help scholars categorize and evaluate how methodological approaches to the image-text relationship have evolved in and through past contributions to biblical scholarship as well as the study of ancient visual and verbal representation more broadly. As suggested in chapter 3, several trends are evident: (1) in terms of image-text congruence, biblical scholars have mostly abandoned the practice of juxtaposing images and texts in a fragmentary manner and instead are offering more precise analyses of ever-larger constellations of literary imagery and iconographic motifs; (2) with respect to image-text correlation, rather than thinking about visual-verbal relationships simply in terms of illustration or ekphrasis, most biblical scholars have come to focus on how images and texts are mutually dependent on a common mental concept; and (3) in terms of image-text contiguity, while the majority of biblical scholars choose to work with images and texts from the same cultural context, it remains possible to compare non-contiguous data in service of less historical-critical goals. Second, the above typology reveals the need for biblical scholars to be more explicit about which aspects of the image-text relationship they are addressing and how their approach to these issues comes to bear on their interpretive procedures. While I do not intend to advocate for a uniform way of dealing with the relationship between ancient art and the Bible, I contend that a more consistent use of terminology would help biblical scholars be more aware of how their diverse approaches relate to one another.

The fourth principle recognizes that any consideration of the image-text relationship must not only address questions about method but also issues concerning theory. Art historians and literary critics traditionally have characterized inter-artistic comparisons in terms of either opposition and difference ("image versus text") or mutuality and likeness ("image as text"; §3.3.1). More recently, however, visual theorists have proposed new conceptual frameworks for examining visual-verbal interactions (§3.3.2). For instance, through his notion of the image-text dialectic, Mitchell attempts to account for the complex ways in which images and texts interact with and mutually influence one another (§3.3.2.1). In Mitchell's estimation, a tension of similarity and difference, visuality and textuality can emerge not only between discrete forms of media but also within the same art object. Mitchell also develops the idea of a metapicture, which refers to the way in which certain images can be understood to "picture" other pictures or to reflect on the nature of visual and verbal representation more broadly (§3.3.2.2). This concept provides Mitchell with a way of anchoring theoretical reflection on the image-text relationship to an analysis of particular works of art that juxtapose visual and verbal data. While Mitchell's theories are often utilized in the study of contemporary visual culture, they can also be applied to ancient images and texts (§3.3.3; §3.4). Thus, *by conceptualizing the image-text relationship in terms of dialectical tensions and metapictures, scholars can more precisely describe the nature of visual-verbal interactions in the ancient world.*

Insofar as Mitchell moves beyond rather simplistic notions of ekphrasis and illustration, description and depiction, his theories can challenge biblical scholars and ANE art historians alike to think in more sophisticated ways about the nature of inter-artistic comparisons. For instance, one of the implications of the image-text dialectic is that all media are mixed media and that all art is composite art—that is, there are no pure images or texts but only a continuum of "imagetexts." As a result, instead of simply comparing images with texts, scholars might analyze how visuality informs the use and function of written materials, and conversely, how textuality enters into the logic and arrangement of pictorial compositions (§3.3.3).

In addition, the image-text dialectic implies a bi-directional, mutual interaction between visual and verbal data. This perspective would prompt biblical scholars to explore not only how ANE art influenced the production and reception of the Hebrew Bible, but also how ancient literature, whether biblical or otherwise, might have shaped how Israelite viewers saw and interpreted iconographic data (§3.4; §6.4.2). Mitchell's theories also suggest that one could study an ancient art object that combines visual and verbal media, such as the Behistun relief, as a type of metapicture of the image-text relationship for a given time and place (§3.3.3; §3.4). Among other things, this approach would help situate broader discussions about the relationship between ancient art and the Bible with respect to contextually

specific artifactual remains that weave together word and image in unique representational patterns. These suggestions do not by any means exhaust the analytical possibilities that could be generated by applying theories about the image-text dialectic and metapicture to studies of visual and verbal representation in the ancient world. Rather, this principle suggests that various new lines of inquiry would be opened up if Mitchell's theories are applied to ancient images and texts.

7.2.3. The Meaning of Images

To varying degrees, many scholars presuppose a deep analogy between how visual and verbal signs work.[16] Images in representational art, much like words in written language, are thought to convey information by means of conventional signs that can be read according to an acquired code. I have argued that this "linguistic" approach to the visual arts is especially evident in Panofsky's iconographic method (§4.1). Based upon a textual or philological rationality, this widely utilized approach aims to read a painting like a paragraph by identifying its vocabulary (forms and motifs), parsing its structure (themes and concepts), and uncovering the etymological roots of its culturally conditioned meaning (symbolic value).

While there is much to recommend about this method, my fifth interpretive principle highlights the limitations of this type of approach to visual analysis (§4.2.1). Namely, *unlike linguistic signs, images function as a dense or replete notational system, and as such, they should be understood according to somewhat different semiotic principles than most written languages*. Among visual theorists, Nelson Goodman makes this point most forcibly (§4.2.2.). In brief, Goodman claims that linguistic notations, such as the Roman alphabet, exhibit semiotic articulation—that is, their signs are both syntactically disjoint (i.e., non-identical inscriptions of the same sign are considered equivalent) and syntactically differentiated (i.e., their symbolic systems work by gaps and discontinuities between discrete signs). In contrast, non-linguistic notational systems, including most images, exhibit semiotic density or repleteness—that is, their signs are non-disjoint (i.e., every difference in visual form carries with it the potential to express meaning) and non-differentiated (i.e., between any two existing marks in the system, there is a potentially continuous field of composite signs that are semiotically meaningful). Thus, while Goodman recognizes that both linguistic and non-linguistic systems consist of conventional signs, he maintains

[16] This perspective is also operative in the first four principles of my visual hermeneutics. Images, no less than texts, are part of a given culture's symbol system, have a communicative capacity, can be read as a type of language, and interact with written materials by means of inter-artistic relationships.

that these signs express meaning through different signifying structures. Seen from this vantage point, the problem with the iconographic method is not that it attempts to read images as a type of language but that it assumes that the language of images operates as an articulate notational system as opposed to a dense one.

Two trends in iconographic research (whether appropriated in biblical scholarship or other fields) reflect an uncritical transfer of notions about linguistic signs to the realm of artistic representation (§4.2.3). First, many biblical scholars tend to carefully scrutinize only those visual elements that are essential for identifying what an image represents—that is, its artistic motifs or intrinsic subject matter. Other artistic details, including size, color, layout, the profile of figures, style, and so forth are either given little attention or are treated as "corrective principles" at the level of pre-iconographic analysis. However, for images and other sign systems that exhibit semiotic density, every difference in visual form carries with it the potential to express meaning. In this view, an image contains a surplus of meaning that includes, but also extends beyond, the expression of its basic subject matter or symbolic content.

Second, biblical scholars also tend to place a great deal of emphasis on categorizing visual motifs into clearly demarcated typologies. This approach is not without warrant and in many cases yields helpful classification schema. Nevertheless, iconographic typologies can too readily presume that ancient art operates according to clearly defined gaps and discontinuities between individual signs within the notational system. In general, non-linguistic signs consist of a potentially continuous field of visual forms, each of which is capable of expressing a unique value. Ancient art is no exception. In fact, composite and hybrid forms are quite common in the archaeological record. With this in mind, one must caution against the tendency to assume that image analysis will *always* produce clearly demarcated typologies or that *every* image can be placed within the categories that do exist.

The sixth principle spells out more explicitly how biblical scholars might revise their methods of visual analysis in light of critical reflection on the languages of art. One of the practical implications of seeing images as a dense notational system is that every detail or variation in visual form can be thought to have a signifying function. Even visual features that do not directly contribute to the expression of the intrinsic subject matter are potentially relevant when it comes to decoding an image's underlying meaning or message. As a result, *biblical scholars should analyze ancient art beyond the level of iconography by considering how aspects of compositional design, rhetoric of display, and mode of signification contribute to what (and how) an image means*.

Since these visual features are not readily accounted for in Panofsky's schema, I have laid out specific proposals for what it might look like to an-

alyze several non-iconographic elements of artistic representation, including: (1) how issues of compositional design, such as profile and scale, affect how images are seen and responded to by some viewers (§4.3.1); (2) how certain artistic traditions, styles, and subjects are referenced in order to construct rhetorically persuasive visual messages (§4.3.2); and (3) how modes of signification, such as perceptual and conceptual forms of art, are used to manipulate an observer's view of reality and understanding of history (§4.3.3).

To be sure, decoding the meaning of these visual details is a process that is open to multiple interpretations and is contingent on habits and conventions that vary from culture to culture (§4.3.4). Yet, the potential for ambiguity in this form of visual analysis does not give warrant to the tendency to rigidly distinguish between subject matter and style, intrinsic content and decorative detail. Instead, what this hermeneutical perspective attempts to do is to prompt scholars, especially those who primarily work with texts, to think more critically about the nature of visual representation and the methods required to read its pictorial language.

Two broader implications emerge from this perspective on visual analysis. First, in order to more fully account for the nature of images as a dense notational system, biblical scholars would do well to slightly revise certain aspects of Panofsky's method. In particular, at least one additional level of meaning should be included in Panofsky's tripartite schema. This level, which I am inclined to call "meta-iconographic analysis," would represent a stage of interpretation in which one more explicitly considers issues related to style—compositional design, rhetoric of display, and mode of signification—as an object of interpretation in its own right and not merely as a corrective principle. The purpose of highlighting such considerations is to draw attention to aspects of an image that often (though not always) go under-scrutinized in iconographic methodologies.

Second, this interpretive principle raises important questions about whether "iconography" is a suitable name for the field of scholarship that seeks to interpret the Bible in light of ancient art. While useful in some respects, this terminology might unnecessarily imply that Panofsky's method is the *only* approach to visual analysis that a biblical scholar (or anyone else) might employ or that determining the meaning of an image is tantamount to identifying its iconographic content. An alternative term such as "visual culture exegesis" is not without its own limitations, and moreover, renaming a field does not automatically lead to concomitant changes in methodological procedure or interpretive practice. Nevertheless, this interpretive principle makes it clear that it would be more productive to talk about, describe, and conceptualize iconographic exegesis in ways that move away from a singular focus on the iconographic method.

7.2.4. The Nature and Function of Images

The first six principles aim to reevaluate how scholars approach topics that have traditionally played a central role in iconographic exegesis—that is, the importance and meaning of ancient images as well as their relationship to the Bible. The final three principles have a slightly different purpose. Rather than revising existing methods, these principles attempt to expand the analytical scope of this field of study, at least as it has been traditionally pursued.

Toward this end, the remaining principles engage topics that are not typically explored in most contributions to iconographic exegesis or most other avenues of religio-historical research, including: the history and theory of visual response (principle 7); the role of visual practice as a medium of belief (principle 8); and the effects of the religious apparatus of sight on visual experience (principle 9). While all of these issues demand the close analysis of visual materials, they also entail broader questions about the nature of visual culture and, with it, the beliefs, attitudes, and epistemologies that structure and generate the ways in which images are used and responded to in specific socio-culture and religious contexts.

The seventh interpretive principle addresses what seems to be a rather straightforward question about what an image is, or more precisely, how one should construe the relationship between a picture and its referent. Whether dealing with conceptual or perceptual art, scholars and casual observers alike tend to believe that images are a form of mediated representation in which what one encounters in an image (i.e., representation) is ontologically distinct from what one encounters in the thing or person an image depicts (i.e., reality). Despite the rather commonsensical nature of this understanding, the history of visual response tells a different story (§5.1). Throughout time and across cultures, one finds countless examples of viewers who talk about and respond to images as if they were living things rather than just works of art. Instead of dismissing such responses as reflecting naïve or primitive superstitions, a visual hermeneutics would seek to understand where these impulses come from, why they persist, and what they reveal about culturally conditioned perceptions concerning the relationship between representation and reality. In particular, my visual hermeneutics affirms the following: *Since viewers often treat images as if they were living things, scholars should carefully attend to the nature, power, and agency of ancient art objects as well as the patterns and implications of visual responses to them.*

As discussed in chapter 5, art historian David Freedberg and social anthropologist Alfred Gell each offer theoretical frameworks for understanding how and why images seem to take on lives of their own in the eyes of certain observers. From an ontological perspective, Freedberg contends that the power of images is predicated on a belief that signifier and signified can

become fused. The result is that certain images are believed not only to symbolically represent their referent but to manifest their presence (§5.2.1). Gell's approach is more anthropological in nature. By framing the animation of art in terms of social agency and actor-network theories, Gell is able to describe how images generate and structure social interactions in much the same way as human beings (§5.2.2).

What makes the work of Freedberg and Gell valuable to biblical scholars and others interested in ancient art is that it highlights the fact that the meaning of an image cannot be fully accounted for by iconographic modes of analysis, even when nuanced in the ways I describe in principles 5 and 6. Rather, by raising important questions about the cognitive processes and social mechanisms that lie behind these strange forms of visual response, Freedberg and Gell offer hermeneutical perspectives that can expand and enrich the ways in which scholars study ANE visual culture (§5.2.3). Two points of application are of note.

First, it is important to more closely scrutinize the nature and status of the *ṣalmu* in Mesopotamian visual culture. As ANE art historian Zainab Bahrani has shown, the *ṣalmu* should not be understood in terms of Western notions of mimesis but rather as a type of hypperreality in which the presence of a thing or person could be embodied in and through representation (§5.3.1). Not unlike a simulacrum, the *ṣalmu* could function as a substitute for, not just a representation of, the thing or person it signified. This belief in the lifelike status of the *ṣalmu* can be inferred from a variety of different Assyro-Babylonian practices, including the *mīs pî* ceremony, the preparation of a substitute king (*šar pūḫi*), ritual battle enactments, and the use of certain apotropaic objects. However, the blurring of ontological distinctions between reality and representation is perhaps most evident in the theft and destruction of images in the context of war (§5.3.2). The motivations behind this form of visual response cannot fully be accounted for in terms of vandalism or looting. Given the fact that images of the king or deity were thought to embody or repeat their presence, these acts of violence against images should be seen as a distinctive military strategy akin to assaulting and abducting enemy combatants.

Second, this interpretive principle should prompt biblical scholars to focus more explicitly on the implications of visual response in the Hebrew Bible. Of particular interest in this regard are instances in which images are described as being destroyed or disparaged in the context of cultic reform or prophetic discourse (§5.4). Instead of merely concluding that these responses are evidence of religiously motivated iconoclasm, biblical scholars might draw on the work of Freedberg, Gell, and Bahrani to address ancient Israelite attitudes and beliefs about what images are, how they function, and why they tend to elicit from their viewers both fear and fascination, violence and devotion.

Broadly construed, the eighth principle attempts to reimagine what constitutes the proper subject matter of iconographic exegesis. Traditionally, this field has focused primarily on ancient art, including how, why, and for whom images were produced. While this object- or author-centered focus can provide important insights, it is not the only way to approach the intersection of visual culture and Israelite religion, or for that matter, seeing and believing. In fact, one of the orienting assumptions of the study of religious visual culture is that visual data cannot be isolated from questions about the practices that put images to use (§6.2.1). Thus, *when studying Israelite religion, biblical scholars should focus not only on specific images and their iconographic content but also on what people do with images—that is, the practices that rely on and employ materials objects as the visual medium of belief.*

Religio-historical research could be advanced in fruitful ways if scholars began to move beyond traditional questions about what types of images the biblical text prohibits and instead focused on how all sorts of images—both aniconic and iconic—were used and responded to in Israelite religion. To be sure, there is not always a wealth of direct evidence concerning ancient visual practices, and, as a result, scholars interested in religious antiquity rarely have access to the same amount of data as David Morgan or others who study contemporary religious visual culture. Yet it is on this point that theory—and in particular, theory based on findings from cognitive science and/or the social sciences—can be rather helpful. Even when hard contextual data is sparse, inferences about visual practices can be made from insights about mental processes, anthropological systems, and comparative textual and archaeological data.

In particular, a focus on visual practices can offer new insight into how scholars study the nature and extent of ancient Israel's aniconic tradition. As discussed in chapter 6, semiotic distinctions between iconic and non-iconic signs are somewhat beyond the point when it comes to evaluating Israelite aniconism from a visual culture perspective. In fact, however the image-ban is understood and whenever it was thought to first emerge, Israelite religion clearly relied upon what David Morgan would call a visual medium of belief (§6.3.1). Thus, biblical scholars should not only define Israelite aniconism in a more narrow sense (i.e., as a ban on certain types of images, not artistic representation more broadly), but they should also clarify that a so-called aniconic cult was still "largely unintelligible outside its incarnation in material expressions."[17]

Furthermore, a study of ancient visual culture suggests that what makes a given image "religious"—or conversely, what makes a religion "iconic"—has as much to do with visual practices as it does with visual content

[17] William Arweck and Elisabeth Keenan, *Materializing Religion: Expression, Performance, and Ritual* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2006), 2–3.

or the lack thereof (§6.3.2.1). This perspective would prompt biblical scholars to characterize the nature of ancient religions with respect to two intersecting coordinates: one which describes their iconographic preferences with respect to the deity and the other which accounts for the extent to which they incorporate iconic images (or visual materials in general) into their worship practices.

Finally, evidence of ancient visual practices reveals that there is not necessarily a one-on-one correspondence between what an image looks like or how it signifies and the way in which it is put to use (§6.3.2.2). Taking up this point of view would not only shed light on the iconic function of non-iconic objects but it would also more clearly highlight the fact that when seen from the perspective of visual practices, Israelite religion was not as different from other ANE religions as many have supposed.

My ninth and final interpretive principle takes up issues surrounding the socio-cultural and religious construction of visual experience. The dominant perspective in visual culture theory is that what people see in an image is never simply a function of biological perception, nor is it ever rigidly determined by knowledge of iconographic conventions or art historical contexts. Rather, viewers actively process visual data in light of a distinctive set of epistemological and moral lenses, or ways of seeing. These lenses, in turn, not only shape how viewers interpret what a given image means, but in an even more basic way, they condition what viewers see or recognize in an image in the first place.

When applied more specifically to the study of religion, ways of seeing can be said to structure and generate a "sacred gaze"—that is, a specific mode of visuality in which a viewer interprets pictorial data from the vantage point of certain religious beliefs, values, experiences, or knowledge (§6.2.2). A study of religious ways of seeing can potentially shed light on how belief is mediated through visual experience, and conversely, how seeing itself is a thoroughly engaged, purposeful, constructive, and indeed, religious activity. This hermeneutical perspective can be summed up as follows: *Because vision is deeply informed by underlying beliefs, values, and knowledge, it is important to consider the effects of the religious apparatus of sight on how ancient viewers might have processed and interpreted visual data.*

Studying religious ways of seeing in ancient Israel would redirect traditional approaches to the study of Israelite religion in several ways. At a methodological level, this approach would draw more attention to the role of viewers in the meaning-making process, including how they may have repurposed or reimagined existing religious imagery in light of new theological contexts and beliefs. In other words, particular beliefs and religious knowledge actually might have led religious viewers to look for or even recognize things in an image, such as religiously meaningful symbols or other numinous qualities, that nonbelievers might fail to perceive. This

methodological perspective would especially influence how biblical scholars approach the search for Yahweh's image. Although most past contributions to this area of research have relied upon sophisticated archaeological, textual, and iconographic modes of analysis, they have yet to consider how underlying beliefs and religious knowledge might have come to shape the way in which Israelite viewers processed visual data and/or visualized their deity in specific art objects (§6.4.1) From the perspective of religious visual culture, even if it could be proven that ancient Israel never had images of its deity (a point which is itself open to debate), it would still be possible to suggest that some Israelite viewers may have visualized Yahweh in images that were not otherwise intended to depict their deity.

While it is difficult to determine beyond doubt how specific historical audiences reacted to or interpreted a given image, there is nevertheless several lines of evidence that suggest that ancient viewers repurposed religious imagery in light of their underlying beliefs (§6.4.2). Among other things, this evidence suggests that literary descriptions of Yahweh as a god of the storm, an enthroned patriarch, a divine warrior, an armed archer, a lion, and so forth might have conditioned how ancient viewers interpreted visual data that reflects similar motifs. If this were the case, then biblical scholars would need to reevaluate how certain non-Yahwistic images might have come to appear very Yahweh-like to the casual (and devout) Israelite observer. The search for Yahweh's image (even if not his "one" cult image) may be, in this view, at an end—though not in the way that many archaeologists would have it.

7.3. The Application of a Visual Hermeneutics

What is the purpose of this visual hermeneutics and how might it be put to use? As stated at the outset, these nine principles are intended to distill critical reflection on visual representation and visual culture into a more concise and practical resource that can guide and inform how one reads images and sees texts. With this goal in view, I have designed this interpretive framework to be as user-friendly as possible. The nine principles articulated above offer a brief summary of the lengthy discussions in chapters 2–6, and furthermore focus on specific implications for method and practice.

While potentially advantageous, the usability, or at least brevity, of these nine principles might also be their Achilles heel. In such a distilled format, they run the risk of either over-simplifying complex theories or underrepresenting the full range of hermeneutical issues that might arise in iconographic exegesis. Thus, I must reiterate that the hermeneutical principles outlined in this chapter cannot adequately substitute for the more sustained engagement of theory and method in the previous five. Nor is my list meant

to be exhaustive in nature—indeed, I suspect that other principles might be added (and some taken away) in light of additional work in visual culture studies or the particular needs of certain research projects. As a result, these nine principles represent talking points for what is a much longer and more nuanced conversation with the study of ancient art and visual culture.

It also might be asked: For whom is this conversation intended? I imagine that the above discussions will be most relevant for biblical scholars who are already interested in interpreting the Bible in light of ancient art. For these readers, the above reflections are designed to prompt further and more self-critical engagement with issues pertaining to visual representation and the image-text relationship. However, this research is also intended to persuade a few "text-based" scholars to be more inclined toward the study of ancient images in the first place. In this sense, my case for the importance of visual theory in iconographic exegesis doubles as a case for images in biblical scholarship more broadly.

In addition, many aspects of this visual hermeneutics is geared toward interpretive issues and methods that are particularly germane to the field of biblical studies. Yet here again, I hope that these reflections on visual theory and ancient art will also be valuable to a broader audience, including other fields in the humanities and social sciences. Therefore, the ultimate goal of this study is not only to further the pictorial turn in biblical scholarship but also to advance knowledge at the intersection of visual culture theory and religio-historical research.

The viability of this visual hermeneutics depends in no small measure on what happens when it is put to use. What sort of fruit does it produce when applied to certain images and texts and how can it advance interpretive methods in general or a certain exegetical topic in particular? Throughout this study, I have attempted to pursue questions about the use (or usefulness) of this visual hermeneutics in two ways.

First, I have set forth a series of constructive proposals that address how aspects of this visual hermeneutics might revise, expand, and nuance widely utilized interpretive methods in iconographic exegesis and related areas of religio-historical research. The goal of these proposals is to provide scholars interested in the intersection between ancient art and the Bible with concrete and practical suggestions about how their interpretive work can be expanded and further nuanced.

Second, throughout this study I have attempted to provide a series of generative examples that demonstrate how a visual hermeneutics can shed light on important issues in the study of the historical, cultural, and religious contexts of the biblical world, including the nature of Israel's aniconic tradition, the search for Yahweh's image, idol parodies in prophetic literature, the visual background of divine metaphors, the nature of the *ṣalmu,* the image-text relationship on ancient artifacts, and the relative importance of textual literacy as a vehicle of communication. By covering a wide range

of interpretive questions, I have intended to provide through these examples a representative—and, hopefully, generative—set of applications that demonstrate how theories on visual representation and visual culture can advance biblical research.

The issues addressed above certainly do not exhaust the possible ways in which this visual hermeneutics can be put to use. To be sure, other topics might have just as easily been chosen. In fact, I did *not* select the above issues because they uniquely illustrate the hermeneutics outlined above. To the contrary, some aspects of this visual hermeneutics will prove to be far less relevant to certain topics than they would be to others. This should come as no surprise and does not by any means count against the value or effectiveness of the theory as a whole. The purpose of this hermeneutical framework, after all, is not to establish universally applicable rules of interpretation but rather to surface new ways of thinking about how ancient visual materials and practices might come to bear on the study of the Bible. Thus, while the proof might be in the eating of the pudding as the saying goes, not every batch of pudding needs to provide *all* the proof. This visual hermeneutics—or any other interpretive framework for that matter—is best judged in light of multiple applications, each of which might creatively use and refine these ideas to meet the needs of specific interpretive contexts and questions.

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Summary

In recent years, a growing number of biblical scholars have turned to ancient art as a vital resource for understanding the historical and conceptual background of the Bible. While these «iconographic» approaches have done much to advance findings from more traditional text-based studies, they have yet to fully address issues pertaining to the nature, power, and meaning of ancient art as well as the social practices, effects, and responses that are derived from and inform how images functioned in ancient visual culture. This volume offers a sustained engagement of theories of visual culture with the goal of further refining how images are utilized in biblical research. Issues addressed include: the function of images as a language of communication and its implications for debates about textual literacy in ancient Israel (ch. 2); the nature of the image-text relationship and how it informs methods of iconographic exegesis as well as the analysis of ancient mixed-media artifacts (ch. 3); approaches to visual analysis that take into account how linguistic and non-linguistic signs convey meaning in different ways (ch. 4); how theories about the ontology and social agency of art shed new light on the history of visual response in the ancient world, including image theft and destruction (ch. 5); and how a consideration of visual practices and the social and religious dimensions of sight can advance understandings of the nature of Israelite aniconism and the search for Yahweh's cult image (ch. 6). Insights gained from these analyses are synthesized into a hermeneutical framework that outlines a more critical approach to working with images in the field of biblical studies.